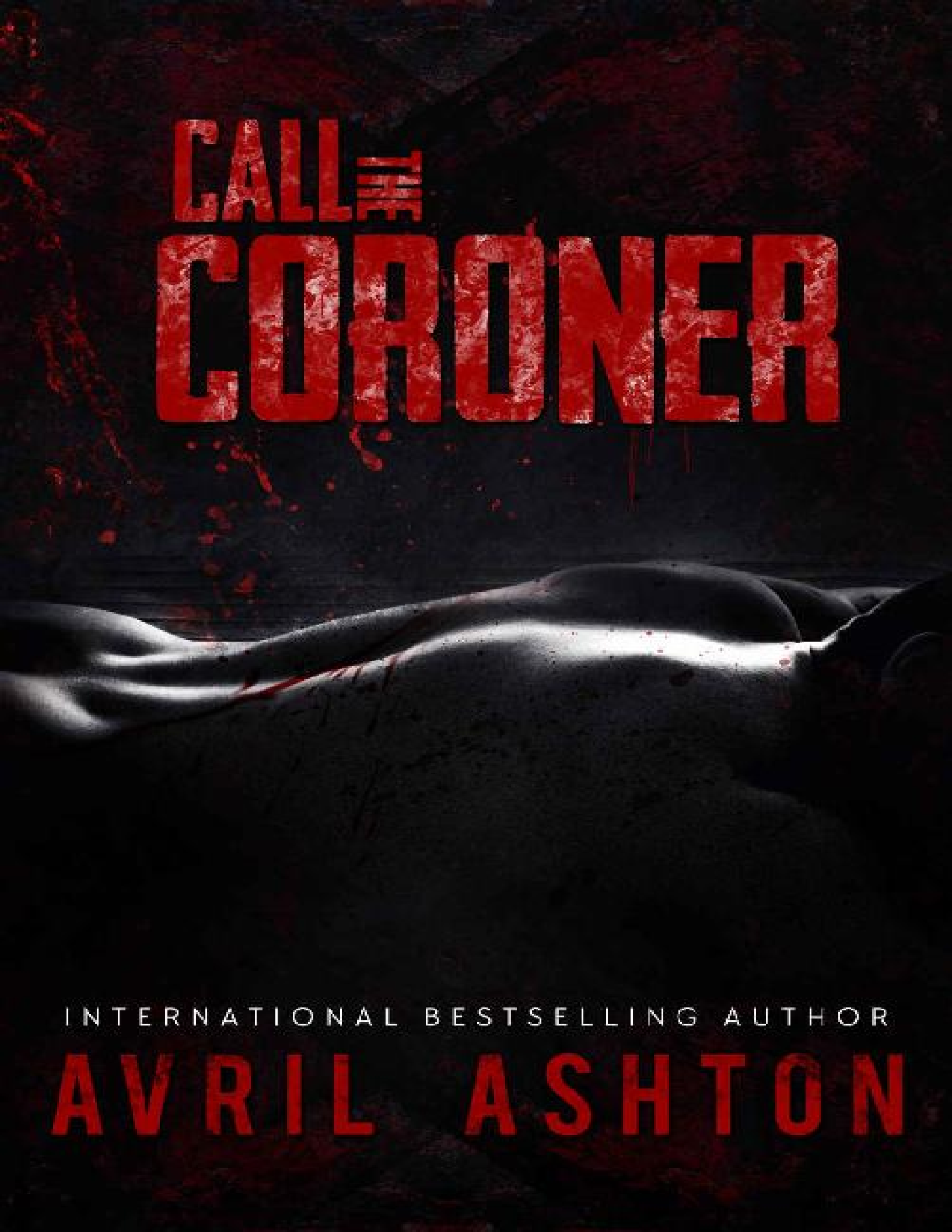
CALL THE
CORONER
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AVRIL ASHTON

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BLURB

A clash of wills between predators…

He’s been living underground for a long time, but the only thing guaranteed to bring Daniel Nieto back to the surface is the identity of his wife’s killer. With the whisper of one name, he puts it all on the line for vengeance. He’s got plans for Stavros Konstantinou.

The title of monster fits too well for Stavros to want to be anything other than what he is. Time spent in Daniel Nieto’s dungeon, chained and tortured, will never change that. Starved of food, sunlight and freedom, he waits for an opening to turn the tables on the only man who’s ever come close enough to scare him.

Somewhere between the slide of knife against skin, and the drip of blood on cold concrete, things change. Grief and hatred collide with lust and obsession, and this time Daniel and Stavros are on the same side. This time, they’re fighting a losing battle against a connection forged by much more than a love of violence and bloodshed.

In a war this bloodied, what do you do when the bodies start hitting the floor?

Warning: *Gun play, knife play, blood play, breath play. Non Con, Dub Con. Water sports. Triggers*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks, always, to Natalie Peltier, Amy Schaffer, and Anne Mejlhede
To La Quette
Andri Theologou, for Stavros.
Mary Cabrera-Redondo, for Daniel.
Joanna Villalongo, for reaching out.
To Lissa, for answering my panicked texts, for commiserating, for listening. Basically for helping to talk me off the ledge every single time. I appreciate it more than you know.

To the members of Av's Gang, for waiting. For putting up with my teases and my weird ways. And for holding it down as I try to fix my broken self. I love you guys.

To Mr. A. For the support you don't even know you give. For letting me be weirdly me, and adoring me anyway.

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DEDICATION

For the broken ones
The shook ones
And those in between

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“There’s nothing like the draw of the warmth of family to make you want to come in from the cold.”

-Daniel Nieto

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CHAPTER ONE

The phone call came at night. One of those nights when Daniel Nieto didn't sleep, when heat clung to the air, sending moisture dripping down his spine under the shirt he wore. On a night so dark, only the sporadic spark of fireflies dotted the blackness where he sat outside on the porch while his memories died slowly inside the Greek-style house.

The small burner phone he'd placed on his right thigh vibrated, making his skin tingle, breaking the monotony of silence for a few unwelcomed seconds. The amount of people with the number didn't even total five. But there was a certain number one could call, should they want to reach him. The woman who'd answer would redirect to whatever burner Daniel had at the time, but only if she deemed the caller worthy.

Apparently this caller passed the test.

"¿Bueno?" He listened, head tilted back, eyes closed as she spoke only the impending caller's name. Curiosity made him tell her, "Put him through."

She didn't say goodbye, all he heard was a soft click indicating the call had transferred.

"Tek," he greeted the man on the other end with a familiarity he was relieved to not have to fake. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You wanted to know who'd killed your wife."

His eyes flew open, stomach clenching as he lurched forward. Any mention of his wife sent him reeling. He'd known the identity of his wife's killer from day one, but sometimes ignorance had its advantages. He kept

up with the pretense now, despite the sudden pressure in his jaw as he gritted his teeth.

“You know.”

“I do.”

Daniel liked to observe people. How else would he be able to discern their weaknesses? He knew his caller, not personally, but enough. Not once had he anticipated this phone call. He knew the name Tek was about to hand him, but instead of enlightening his caller, Daniel bade him, “Tell me.”

“Stavros Konstantinou.”

Beatific smile bared to the quiet night surrounding him, Daniel stretched out his legs. “You don’t say.” Knowing what he did about Tek and the man whose name he just dropped, Daniel had to wonder why the sudden betrayal. It didn’t make a difference, but for someone like him, any kind of information was a weapon to be used.

“I can give you everything you need to know, and where you can find him.”

The rage in Daniel’s gut—his constant companion these past few years—simmered nice and hot, but he laughed at the offer. “Where’s the fun in that, *mi amigo*?” Before, all of it was business.

Now?

Pure pleasure.

The only way he got any nowadays.

“Whatever floats your boat.”

The caution in Tek’s voice meant Daniel’s reputation was at the forefront of his mind. Good man. “I owe you, Tek. Whatever you need. Anytime.”

“I just might take you up on that.”

Daniel dropped the phone to the floor next to his feet and ground it underneath his heel. Then he stood.

He’d carefully crafted his plan. Keeping ahead of those intent on laying him next to his dead wife by no less than ten paces. When they were on their hands and knees, playing marbles in the dirt, he was the chess grandmaster.

Most thought Daniel remained in the dark about the identity of the man who’d led a gang of hooded men into his house in Mazatlán. They thought

him helpless to retaliate, off somewhere still recovering from the effects of that bloody night.

Physical injuries were all healed up now, though the evidence of the garrote around his throat lingered. The wounds not seen by the naked eye were different. They festered, spreading, infecting everything. He liked it like that. Going after a man like Stavros Konstantinou required stealth and planning, as well as a certain fire. A lust for blood and death. The Greek was a contractor, operating a lucrative mercenary business that hired out its services to only the highest bidders. He killed for money. Without conscience. Without repercussions.

Untouchable.

A monster.

After staring into the mirror for all of his life, Daniel was adept at recognizing monsters. Stavros took everything from him within the space of ten minutes, and Daniel had spent every moment since then biding his time. Though he appreciated it, Tek's phone call wasn't at all necessary.

He left the clingy darkness behind and stepped into the house, back under the artificial lights that seemed too harsh and bright for his eyes. Upstairs, he found her, wandering off when she'd been put to bed an hour before.

Her hair had come loose from its bun, spilling down to her shoulders as she gripped the front of her nightgown in her fist, preventing her feet from tripping over it, and made her way down the hallway with wide, hollow eyes.

He followed, silent and on alert. Used to it, yet still unable to stomach that sight.

Being witness to her slow fade into nothingness was unbearable. Still he watched, because he was nothing if not dutiful. And if there were two things he knew for sure, they were penance and self-flagellation.

As she opened the door leading out to the porch he'd just vacated, Daniel waved away the two caregivers that rushed forward. He paid them well to take care of her, but he'd do as much as he could when he was around.

Like now, as he joined her outside. They stood side by side, both her hands gripping the edge of the balcony as she inhaled and tilted her face up. Sometimes she was aware of him, and other times, like now, she remained in her own world.

Not safe though, because her world as they'd once known it was disappearing.

His plans were for her. All for her. Because of her. For that, he had to leave tonight. Not right this second, though. Not until she was back in bed, not until he knew she had some respite from it all. He stood next to her in the dense blackness as the breeze he barely felt rustled her hair.

Speaking was useless when she didn't know him, wouldn't recognize him. Besides, he had nothing to say. He gave her his company instead. His presence. All his strength in silence.

Her quiet sobs startled him and he took her into his arms, staring down into eyes that didn't light up at the sight of him. Wet eyes, lost and dull.

He ached.

Still he held her against his chest, allowing her tears to soak him. To stoke and stir the rage like a fire poker. In many ways, hugging her felt like closing his arms around someone unfamiliar. But traces of her remained, and he clung tightest to those.

He wasn't supposed to have weaknesses, but he had her. She stayed in his embrace, alternating between crying softly and jabbering nonsensical things to herself, until his arms burned from holding her. Until his legs protested standing for so long.

Only then did he carry her back to bed, tucking her in before he went through the routine.

Brushing her hair.

Lying next to her atop the covers, ankles crossed, holding her hand. When he left, the caregivers would do this. Every night. Brush her hair, hold her hand, and pray that she succumbed to sleep.

It took thirty-eight minutes from the time he climbed onto the bed to the moment she closed her eyes. The pressure on his hand disappeared and he realized only then how tight she'd been holding on to him.

Daniel brought that hand up to his face, nostrils flaring at the evidence of her nails. He fisted it then dropped that hand to her forehead, smoothing away her hair. After brushing a kiss across her cheek, he got off the bed.

If he lingered, he'd never leave, and he had plans.

With one last look at her peaceful face, he left the bedroom, checking in with her caregivers before he left. Leaving her always swamped him in a toxic mix of relief and guilt. They were with him as he drove away from the

house, and even as he boarded the private jet at the small municipal airport five miles away.

"Ready to do this?"

He waited until he'd buckled the seatbelt before meeting the eyes of the young man who stood over him. "Estoy listo." *I am ready.*

A smile touched Toro's mouth. "I almost feel sorry for him." He dropped next to Daniel and winked. "But almost doesn't count."

No, it did not.

Stavros Konstantinou flicked the lighter on. Then he pinched the blue-tinged flame, extinguishing it. One flick of his thumb and up shot the flame again. With the thumb and forefinger on the other hand, he smothered the light once more.

It was a habit. One he'd held on to through his teen years.

He sat in the outdoor gardens of his villa in Lisbon. In the dark. The men who guarded his home knew to stay far, far away when he came out here. Something he rarely did. But he'd recently come back from the States and he was…restless.

One of the reasons he'd put the villa on the market.

He'd only bought it to be close to a woman and she was gone now. As for the family-owned mercenary business he'd inherited, he'd stepped away from that already. He'd only been as involved as he'd been in order to stay close to his father. But the old man was gone, too. Along with his wife, Stavros' stepmother. Except for his one surviving uncle, his entire lineage had been wiped out. It no longer bothered him—if it ever did—that the only person he mourned was the woman he'd loved, but never had.

His stepsister.

His affection for Annika had been a weakness he'd never appreciated. One he'd sought to stamp out, any means necessary.

He flicked the lighter again, the shimmer of the moon on the water in his swimming pool catching his eye.

Beauty.

Stavros appreciated beauty. He was called to destroy it, but that by no means meant he couldn't appreciate it. Like now. He pulled a cigarette from

his jacket pocket and called forth the tiny flame, putting it to the thin cigarette's end to catch fire. He'd quit smoking before, and he'd quit again.

But tonight, just tonight, he killed himself slowly. Taking a deep drag as he shrugged off his coat, letting it drop next to him.

The moonlight and orange glow on the end of the cigarette were the only illumination here in his little corner. He threw his head back and closed his eyes. A man like him didn't know peace, and likely wouldn't know what to do with it. But he took this moment for what it was, a reprieve until the next battle began.

Nothing to say where it would come from, or when, but he trusted his instincts. His killer instincts, his father called it. He had a nose for blood and a love for spilling it. Inevitably it would come that he'd be doing the breast-stroke in the crimson liquid soon.

The sound of loose gravel tightened his fingers on the cigarette though he didn't move. He blew out a small cloud of smoke and grinned up at the moon.

Yes. Sooner than he'd expected, but he could work with it.

Leaves rustled to his left.

He had company. Stavros licked his lips and flicked ash away. "It's dark and my eyes aren't what they used to be," he spoke in a low tone to his unwelcome visitor. "You came all this way, you may as well show yourself."

No other sound, but a man was suddenly in his line of sight. Directly in front of him. The moon touched his full head of hair, made it shine, but his face was impossible to discern. He was tall and skinny, that Stavros knew. Bold, too, to be where he stood at that moment. Stavros knew a lot of bold men.

None of them were suicidal.

He watched the shadowed figure, eyes hooded against the smoke. "You're brave," he murmured. "I admire bravery, though I find it a wasted trait."

"Those things will kill you, you know that, ¿verdad?"

An ugly voice. Rough and ravaged, as if it had been chopped to bits with a dull machete then tossed into a blender. Only one man had a voice like that. Stavros had given only one man that voice.

Relief loosened his body. He knew this enemy. Knew this fight, and he'd been waiting for it for four years.

He rose slowly, mourning the loss of his comfortable seat. Feet planted apart, he jerked his chin and pinched the cigarette, removing it from his mouth. “Mr. Nieto, you’re far from home tonight.”

“I am where I should be.”

He’d always likened Daniel Nieto to a rabid dog, frothing at the mouth to kill. Unstoppable.

“Is that so?” He dropped the cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his shoe. Then he counted to two and sprang forward, gun in hand.

He never reached Nieto. The sudden burning in his shoulder stopped him, stunned him, and as he blinked in slow motion, it dropped him to his knees at Nieto’s feet.

“I got an interesting call. A little birdie told me you ordered my wife’s death.” Nieto hadn’t moved save for his glittering gaze as he looked down at an immobile Stavros.

He shivered, cold sweeping up from his toes in one quick wave. He’d thought death would’ve been more than this. Less…anti-climactic. But beggars shouldn’t be choosers. He smiled up at Nieto, shadows encroaching on his vision. “Your bird was wrong. I killed her myself. But then you already knew that, didn’t you?”

He came back to consciousness with his mouth stuffed with imaginary cotton, his hair wet with sweat, and his body suspended from a concrete roof by a heavy chain around his neck. He gritted his teeth at the pain radiating from everywhere and shook his head. That rattled the chains.

A light came on.

He was in a cage, a floor to ceiling monstrosity similar to a shark cage, in an otherwise empty industrial-sized space, and he wasn’t alone.

The man standing in the corner snapped his fingers, and Stavros was lowered to the ground by a device he couldn’t see. The chain remained around his neck, his hands bound behind his back. His ankles were also shackled so that he couldn’t move more than a few inches on the floor with his ass.

He cocked his head as Nieto knelt next to him.

“Welcome to my world, Konstantinou. I look forward to your stay.”

“You have made me your prisoner?” He barked a laugh despite the effort that took. “How…original.”

The man winked at him. “Originals are the best. You and I, men like us? We appreciate the best.” He touched the heavy chain at Stavros’ neck. “You

took my wife, so I’m taking your life. Slowly.”

“It doesn’t matter how long you keep me here, I will find a way out of this cage.” Stavros tried to shrug. “And when I do—” He licked his cracked lips. “When I do, *that* is when the true war begins.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Human smuggling.

Petra had hated that part of the business.

A small fond smile touched Daniel's mouth at the memory of their countless arguments on the subject. The killings and drugs his wife had been more than okay with. But she'd drawn the line at the Nieto Cartel selling bodies. Fortunately for her, Daniel had shared her sentiments on the subject.

Unfortunately, his father had been the one to strike that deal while he'd been in charge. Eduardo Nieto chased the money wherever it led.

Now, as Daniel stared down at Stavros Konstantinou, he was part grateful for the connections he'd made in the smuggling world that made it possible to transport the Greek from Lisbon back to the States. One week on a container cargo ship, and his captive hadn't lost his fight.

Daniel liked that.

They'd kept Stavros blindfolded, wearing noise-canceling headphones that shrouded him in silence the entire trip. But they'd finally arrived at their destination.

Time to play. He'd waited a long time for this. He possessed the patience, the time, and the resources to wait however long it took to make Stavros Konstantinou pay most thoroughly for the crimes he'd committed against Daniel. Powerful people had found the Nietos too hard to manipulate, difficult to control. They wanted them out of business and out of the way, and they'd hired Stavros for the job.

Only the Greek killed Daniel's wife instead.

Daniel strode around the chair Stavros was tied to, hands shackled behind him, ankles weighted down with chains. Standing behind him, Daniel removed the blindfold. Then the headphones.

“Hello again, Mr. Konstantinou.”

Stavros flinched.

Daniel circled him, standing directly in his line of vision next to Henan, one of Petra’s childhood friends he’d assigned to watch over Stavros. His guest’s lashes trembled, but he didn’t open his eyes though they appeared to roll back in his head.

“I preferred the other place,” Stavros rasped. He was covered in a thin layer of grime and dust from the ship, muscular body straining against his bonds.

Henan snorted, hand going to the knife sheathed at his hip as he tossed a glance Daniel’s way. He shook his head, ignoring the disappointment in Henan’s gaze. They were moving on Daniel’s timetable.

“Do you?” Daniel went to him, getting close enough to murmur in his ear. “But you haven’t seen it yet.”

“I smell it.” Stavros sniffed almost delicately. “No thanks.”

Daniel’s lips quirked as he nodded to Henan. “That’s too bad.” He grasped the chain around Stavros’ neck and hauled him to his feet. The other man tripped, stance wavering as his body swayed. “Let me guess, you’re hungry. You’re thirsty, and you want to get this over with.”

Eyes still closed, with Henan holding him upright, Stavros shrugged. “I did wonder how long you’d torture me with the sound of your voice.” His eyes snapped open then, a drowsy gray, red-rimmed. “But you know what? It’s growing on me. Go on.” He jerked his chin at Daniel. “Talk to me. Tell me things.”

Daniel flicked his gaze to Henan who nodded once, one hand gripping Stavros’ nape, the other holding his unsheathed blade.

Then Daniel talked. “She was beautiful, did you know that? Fierce.” Just speaking of her to her killer’s face soiled Daniel’s memories of Petra. He maintained his firm grip on his emotions, but not without effort. Not without pain. “Bloodthirsty, too.” He held out his hand without taking his gaze from Stavros’ blank features. Henan’s knife settled in his palm. Heavy. Warm. “Because she sanctioned your death.”

He struck, slicing open Stavros’ left cheek. Henan gripped Stavros’ hair, jerking his head back, and kicking him in his lower back. He crashed to the

floor on his knees before falling onto his stomach.

Daniel got down on the cold floor with him, forcing Stavros face-up, ensuring their eyes met. “She wanted your blood.” Daniel smiled at him, the scent of blood invading his nostrils in the most intoxicating way. “Even in death,” he whispered as he dragged the tip of the bloodied blade across Stavros’ throat. “Even in death, my wife gets whatever she wants.”

Blood dripped down Stavros’ face, getting into his mouth, trailing down his neck. He didn’t seem to notice. “So do it.”

Daniel got to his feet, a raw chuckle rumbling past his dry throat. “Not that easily. And not so quickly.” He placed his right foot at Stavros’ throat, pressing against the thick chain. Stavros writhed, trying to get away from the pressure, but he had nowhere to go, and no means of getting there. “My foot will remain at your throat, when I’m here and even when I’m not, to ensure you never forget. Your life is mine now.”

Henan held out the electric cattle prod, and Daniel got a nice swell of satisfaction in his belly when Stavros’ eyes went wide and he tried to rise from under Daniel’s boot.

“Going somewhere?” He jolted the Greek in the side and when he jerked and convulsed, curling in on himself, Daniel pressed the prod to his lower back. He hit him three more times until Stavros stopped moving, stopped moaning.

Then he stepped back. “String him up,” he barked to Henan. “I’ll be back.”

And he’d thought being stuck on that fucking ship sucked.

Stavros frowned down at the floor from where Daniel Nieto’s guard had strung him up. He hung, head limp, arms long gone numb. The cut on his cheek from Daniel’s blade burned and if he squinted he could make out the bruise from the goddamn cattle prod.

Shit, but that hurt.

His toes didn’t quite touch the floor, and the chains around his wrists and throat bit into his skin. All of that, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been fed. The last time he’d had water. His throat was sandpaper dry, and just as rough when he swallowed.

Torture, huh?

You didn’t get to be someone like Stavros Konstantinou by not having endured a few torture sessions. And he didn’t get to be as feared as he was without having to experience physical pain. He killed for a living, owned a company of international killers. It would damn sure take more than Daniel Nieto’s cattle prod to put him off his game.

Still, he could do with a lemonade. Water with a lemon wedge at the very least.

Daniel and his forced-ripe henchman, Henan, better not get comfortable. Because Stavros wouldn’t be staying long.

Henan re-entered the cage—similar to the one in Lisbon, except not as high—first. He grinned when Stavros lifted his head. Pure evil stared back at Stavros. With Daniel there was a disconnect, a detachment, his emotions divorced from what he was. Stavros understood that. But Henan, his hatred played him close, flashing all over his face in bright red blotches.

That was a weakness.

“Back so soon?” Stavros asked. “I was just about to close my eyes. You know, get my beauty rest.”

Henan’s nostrils flared. He wanted Stavros cowering in fear, and the fact that he wasn’t irked the big bald man with arms as large as his thighs. “You’re going to die.”

“Am I?” Stavros made a show of looking around the cage. “I see no one around man enough to kill me.”

Henan launched at him, thick meaty fingers at Stavros’ throat, squeezing.

Stavros choked, swinging slightly but not quite able to escape Henan’s fingers cutting off his breath. He stilled his struggles, allowing his head to fall back, baring his throat and when Henan shifted closer, Stavros gathered the last vestiges of his strength and head-butted the man.

God. Damn.

Henan yelped and staggered away, but Stavros was left swaying, dizzy, a small trickle of blood making its way down the bridge of his nose. Daniel appeared at the cage’s entrance, standing there all still and silent like the angel of death cloaked in black.

Face stoic.

“¡Hijo de la chingada!” Henan spun to Stavros, gun pointed at him.

“Henan,” Daniel uttered the one word, but the tone and cadence, dark and commanding, smothered Stavros’ heartbeat.

Henan froze.

“Your owner should have taught you better,” Stavros told Henan. “Never let the enemy get under your skin. We just got started, but you’ve already lost this game, Henan.” He smiled slowly, tasting blood when he licked his lips. “If you were my pet, you’d be dead for that weakness.”

Rage darkened Henan’s already red face. He stepped forward.

“Henan.” Still, Daniel never looked away from Stavros. “Leave us.”

To his credit, Henan didn’t hesitate. He turned away immediately and exited the cage, melting into the shadows as Daniel entered, striding in measured steps over to Stavros.

“Your pet dog lacks discipline,” Stavros said. “The blame lies squarely on the owner’s shoulders, of course.”

Daniel watched him, hands shoved into the pockets of the dark wool coat that hung just past his knees. Flecks of white dotted his collar and lapel, and as Stavros watched, they disappeared.

Melting.

Snow.

They sized each other up in silence. Try as hard as he could, Stavros got no read on Daniel. That frustrated him. He could read anyone, allowing him to gauge their weakness and use it against them.

But Daniel Nieto had only ever had one weakness and Stavros had killed her.

“How long do you plan on keeping me here?” he asked, mostly to cut through the bullshit quiet that grew thicker by the second.

Daniel’s expression—as animated as a blank piece of paper—didn’t change. “How long do you think it will take for you to do penance? What length of time will make up for you invading my home and taking my wife from me?”

“You realize none of that was personal, right?” Stavros frowned. “You do know I was hired to do a job.”

“I have dealt with the people behind the scene who issued the order.” Daniel’s lips quirked, but his eyes remained iceberg cold. “It is now your turn. I left the best for last.”

“I am flattered.”

“Deberías de estarlo.” *You should be.* Daniel touched the chain at Stavros’ throat, and for the briefest heartbeat the rough pad of his finger grazed Stavros’ skin.

He flinched.

“To truly break a man, there are certain lines one must cross.” Daniel dropped his hand, putting it back in his pocket. “Lucky for both of us, I crossed those lines decades ago.”

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CHAPTER THREE

"*U.S. and Mexican authorities confirm discovery of cross-border tunnel between Tijuana and San Diego.*"

Daniel tossed aside the newspaper. When he'd resurfaced from his self-imposed exile, word spread in hushed whispers that he was back to claim what rightfully belonged to the Nietos.

To him.

The throne.

He hadn't disabused anyone of that notion. In fact, he'd encouraged the rumor himself. But all of that was subterfuge for his real goals. Going back to the life of a cartel leader, running guns, drugs and humans was no longer in the cards for him. Not anymore.

The woman who no longer remembered him, he owed her.

It was her or death. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But even as he got one monster off his back, another one waited in the wings. So he had to deal with that. Felipe Guzmán blamed Daniel for his sister's demise. Petra's brother hated that Daniel remained alive and free while his sister was anything but.

Felipe had been one of Daniel's soldiers, and in Daniel's absence, his brother-in-law had stepped in to form a new organization, The Ghost Gang.

Felipe hunted Daniel, hoping to draw him out into the open. But Daniel hadn't gotten to the top of the food chain by letting emotion dictate his actions. He had plans, like that newspaper headline.

A few words whispered in the vicinity of the right people, and the tunnels Guzmán used to bring his drugs into California were now public

knowledge.

“¿Jefe?”

He focused on his nephew. His brother, Antonio, never acknowledged his child growing up, but Toro had the Nieto fire in his eyes, and that unquenchable thirst for blood and power they’d all inherited from the old man.

“The package,” he asked Toro in rapid Spanish. “Where is it?”

Toro jerked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to where a black sedan was parked.

“Show me.”

“Package Two is already acquired,” Toro told him just before he popped the trunk.

Package One occupied Toro’s trunk. Ankles bound. Wrists, too. Mouth taped shut. Head covered with a black shopping bag, with small holes for him to breathe. He moaned, a sound drenched in pain.

Daniel smiled.

Starting a gang war wasn’t that hard. Not if you knew where to poke. Felipe Guzmán’s direct competition were The Perez Boys. One by one he was taking out members of both sects, from the middle out. Kill off the lowly foot soldiers and no one noticed or cared. The corner boys worked for whoever offered up the most incentives. Chop off the head first, and someone else would quickly take his place. But get rid of the middle, the heart of an organization, and you brought the entire thing to its knees.

At his nod, Toro tore off the shopping bag. Their package lurched upright, sounds muffled behind the tape, eyes blinking furiously. His face was battered almost beyond recognition, swollen into a bloodied, puffy mess.

Toro liked his knuckle dusters.

Despite the black and blue eyes that appeared more closed than open, Daniel still saw the moment the man in the trunk recognized him. His nostrils flared and his muffled screams got louder.

That curved his lips. He really did like that sound.

“Sí, soy yo.” He ripped off the tape, and the man screamed, until Daniel grabbed him by the throat.

He wore his black leather gloves, and he wished he hadn’t. The frantic beat of pulse was muted under his touch. Still, he squeezed, and when the man writhed and flailed, Toro was there to hold him down.

Tears ran down a mangled face lined with blood.

“I’d send you back to Perez to deliver my message,” Daniel murmured. “But I think your death is message enough.”

It was second nature, natural reflex, to slide the blade of the knife Toro handed him across Package Number One’s throat. Blood spurted with the severing of the carotid artery, immediately soaking the lower sleeves of his coat and making a mess of Toro’s trunk.

With a deep breath, Daniel stepped back. “Handle this,” he told Toro. “The body and the car, immediately. I want him delivered to everybody.”

Toro cocked his head. “How do you—” He cut himself off with a nod and a small smile. “Sí, jefe.”

A piece of the man in the trunk would be sent to everybody in the upper echelon of the Perez organization. The message there could never be misunderstood.

“And Package Two?” Toro asked.

“Keep him on ice,” Daniel told him. “Nothing until you hear from me.”

Toro nodded solemnly. He understood what Daniel meant, he’d been there before. They’d done this before. They’d do it again. He slid his jacket off his shoulders and tossed it to Toro.

“Get this clean.”

“We should get rid of it, jefe.” Toro frowned at him as if Daniel hadn’t thought of it.

“No.”

“Jefe—”

“I said no,” he snapped, and Toro immediately backed down.

“Of course. Perdón, jefe.”

Nieto watched him closely. He looked so much like Antonio. “When you were younger you called me tío. Why did you stop?”

Toro stared at him. At twenty-six he was young in age, but his experiences working for Daniel were already written on his face, much of it hidden by a full, thick beard. He was very much the embodiment of his nickname, well-muscled and filled with dangerous aggression. He had Antonio’s eyes, always watching, way more intelligent than he wanted you to see. Like his father, Toro had a cocky, devilish outer layer he preferred to show. Much more palatable than what resided just underneath the surface, Daniel knew too well.

“You are the boss,” Toro finally answered Daniel’s question with a careless shrug.

“Sí.” He clapped the other man on the shoulder. “But I am your blood first. And with us—” He motioned between them “With us, blood is everything.” He turned away and headed to his own vehicle. “Take care of that coat. It is my favorite.”

“Sí, jefe.”

Of course, he didn’t tell Toro that Petra had been the one to buy him that coat. The last gift she ever bought him. Sometimes he felt closer to her when he wore the coat. Those were the times he knew for sure that his mind was going and leaving his broken body behind.

Eh.

It was bound to happen.

Violence.

It settled over Daniel’s shoulders like a warm blanket. Worn. Comforting. Familiar. He let himself smile, allowed his eyes to close for a moment as he savored it. Violence lived in this place where Stavros waited, chained in the cold basement of the brownstone Daniel had procured just for this.

“Sir.” Boyd stood next to him, medical supplies in hand as he awaited Daniel’s instructions. Despite the lab coat turned from white to a light brown with dirt, and the stethoscope hanging around his neck, Boyd wasn’t an MD. Just a man who’d taught himself some things. He was also a man who owed Daniel a favor or three.

He’d called in all his markers for this.

Eyes closed, face calm and arrogant, his prisoner shifted on the slab of cold metal meant to be a floor.

“Back so soon?” Head lifting as he peered through the bars that caged him, Stavros sat up slowly. In deference, maybe, to the beating he’d received the day before.

Henan wore his anger as a talisman around his neck, exposed for Stavros to take note and use against him. Of course, Stavros’ nonchalant attitude only served to egg Henan on. If the guard had his way, he’d put a bullet through Stavros’ skull in a second.

But of course, the prisoner wouldn't be dying any time soon.

This was Daniel's world. The Greek's, too. They were so alike, it was almost comforting. Daniel would kill him. Or perhaps Stavros would get what he'd tried to take those years ago when he'd taken Daniel's wife instead. He'd take Daniel's life.

"You missed me, yes?" Stavros smiled. He looked…unconcerned. "It is okay to admit it. I have it, that effect on people." The wink was almost jovial.

In the aftermath of that bloody night, Daniel had thought the people who'd dared send Stavros after him had to have been insane to bring his ire down on them. He'd been right. But losing his love sent him there, to insanity, so now they all played on an even field.

"Sir."

Boyd broke Daniel's close, narrow-eyed study of Stavros.

"He has been fed?"

Boyd nodded. "To your specifications."

Bread and water. Once a day.

"Come then." Daniel walked to the cage, opened it with the key on the rosary beads. Petra's rosary beads. He'd wrapped them around his wrist, a crude bracelet. Her blood was still on it. He'd never bothered to wash it off. Years had gone by, so one would have to really search for those droplets.

Daniel saw them every time he gazed at his wrist.

The cage door swung open with a loud, grating sound and Stavros threw his head back and laughed.

"Come inside…" he murmured, staring at Daniel from under long lashes, tugging on the chains around his wrists.

Three strides brought Daniel to Stavros' side, and he knelt, gripping his captive's chin.

Stavros watched him with his patented sneer, daring Daniel. He was a reckless man, courting death with the company he kept. Daniel had watched him long enough to know just how to jolt his prisoner.

As if his thoughts conjured her, footsteps clacked onto the metal stairs leading down to the bunker. If he heard them, Stavros gave no indication. He kept his gaze on Daniel, watching, waiting.

He might have an idea of what was next, but Daniel had never been the predictable sort. The reason he remained alive and breathing today. The

clicking of heels brought their visitor closer, and Daniel shifted away from Stavros, dropping his hold on the man's chin.

Deliberately bringing his gaze to the door of the cage, he nodded to Wilhelmina as she pressed against the bars. She stood tall and statuesque, her mane of dark hair tumbling all over her shoulders like the branches of a walnut tree. She reminded him of that nut as well, her hard outer shell tough to crack despite the wide eyes that pretended at innocence. Black, body-hugging leather hid most of her smooth, sandy-brown skin, but kept her impressive chest on display.

Stavros turned toward her and froze.

She smiled, lips painted red, expression coy as she stepped inside and over to Stavros. Everything about her, from the way she moved, to the way she eyed Stavros, was meant to hypnotize. Daniel watched Stavros take her in with eyes that got wider when she dropped to her knees to straddle him.

"Annika."

His dead sister. Daniel had watched long enough to know Stavros had loved her. Siblings not by blood, just marriage, he'd loved her.

Yet he'd never had her.

"Annika." Her name was a shaky breath of sound as Stavros tried to touch her, hug her, except the chains wouldn't let him.

Daniel wouldn't let him.

Wilhelmina—*Call me Willy, baybee*—writhed on the naked Greek, kissing him, leaving smudges of red behind. Not even an inch away, close enough to hear the breath rattle in Stavros' chest, Daniel sat and observed. She stroked Stavros' back then buried her fingers in his hair while he returned the kiss with hungry, mournful sounds.

Greedy too, as he took something he'd been denied for years.

Willy circled Stavros' neck, both hands gentle at first. Like a lover's touch.

Boyd stepped into the cage for the first time.

Wilhelmina's grip got heavier, more insistent around the Greek's neck. Except the man didn't take heed. Too busy taking what he'd never had before. Like the professional she was, Willy didn't stop, nor did she falter.

She tightened her hold and squeezed. When Stavros finally figured out what was happening, she head-butted him. His naked body jerked, but her hands remained at his neck.

Daniel didn’t take his gaze away, watching as the beautiful woman took the Greek’s life with delicate hands. She stole it from him, and Daniel was jealous. Irrationally jealous that she knew how it felt, taking Stavros’ life. But he’d wanted this.

He accepted it.

When the body stopped moving, she finally lifted both hands. A kind of surrender. She flexed her fingers, closed her hands into fists then opened them before she met Daniel’s eyes with a small smile, and a shine of sexual lust in her gaze.

“Done.”

“Boyd.” Daniel waved the man over as the woman got off Stavros’ naked body and walked to the door of the cage.

“When you need me,” she purred. “You know where I am.”

Daniel nodded. Toro had her information, since the two of them used to run in the same criminal circles. As she’d already been paid, Daniel dismissed her. “Goodbye, Wilhelmina.”

Her heels sounded, but he’d already brought his attention to Boyd, watching dispassionately as Boyd performed CPR, working to bring Stavros back to life.

He wasn’t allowed to stay dead. Not yet. Daniel kept his face impassive, fingers laced, both indexes touching his lips as Boyd chanted, counting under his breath, sweating. Because he knew, if Stavros didn’t wake up, Boyd would die with him.

Stavros’ body arched off the floor.

His lashes fluttered, lifting as he coughed and groaned. His skin was pale, eyes bloodshot and unfocused. Boyd straightened from his kneeling position and stepped back, heaving a loud sigh. Stavros’ head turned, clouded eyes zeroing in on Daniel as his throat worked.

Daniel smiled. “Welcome back.” He saluted. “The fun starts now.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

He'd gotten used to the silence. He could read it, and he knew what that stillness represented.

The calm before the storm.

Huddled in the middle of the cold cell, blood from the last time drying underneath his naked body, Stavros didn't bother to lift his head. His body hurt, but pain had become such a constant companion he'd managed to place it somewhere in the back of his consciousness. If he could move his fingers he'd curl them into fists, but for the moment they hung limply.

Breath, that pesky necessity, also hurt. Taking air into his lungs was a task, one Stavros tried to master as he sat there.

Only one thing could cut a silence so thick, and Stavros waited for it.

Waiting was something he was good at. And killing. Nowadays the waiting held more weight, because he was biding his time, waiting to kill.

Or to be killed.

The other half of the coin.

He was good with either option.

He'd been taught the family business of killing at an early age. Way earlier than a boy should have. But his father believed in perfection and readiness, and he ensured his son was exposed to the violence. Making it so Stavros was numbed to it before his eighteenth birthday. He'd also taken his fair share of lives by then, too.

The pride in his father's eyes kept the blood flowing.

Growing up without a mother, and a father who traveled frequently under the guise of diplomat, there wasn't much opportunity to make anyone

proud. The teachers at his boarding schools didn't count, and his theíos—*uncle*—Christophe definitely cared.

But Christophe wasn't Stavros' father.

So any chance he got to make his father proud, he took it.

He opened his eyes and peered into the darkness. Time didn't have much of a meaning inside his cage. He didn't have a clock, or sunlight, only freezing darkness. No way to tell how long he'd been held here, caged captive, tortured and tormented by Daniel Nieto.

As if Stavros' thoughts had conjured him, a single scrape of shoe against the dusty floor reached his ears. He made himself look up then, though it felt as if a concrete block sat on his neck. He had to blink repeatedly to get his burning eyes to focus.

The darkness shifted, parted, and the lightbulb overheard came on, revealing his captor.

"Mr. Konstantinou." Daniel's voice made Stavros shudder.

"Call me—" It was strange to hear himself nowadays. "Call me Stavros." His lips cracked, and fresh drops of blood ran down onto his chin when Stavros smiled. "We are, after all, intimate now. No?"

He didn't expect a reaction from the man watching him so carefully, and Stavros didn't get one. Daniel's gaze on him was almost casual, dismissive. He expected Stavros to break. He expected Stavros to crack under the force of his torture.

Daniel Nieto should have inquired as to how Stavros reacted to expectations.

Defied them. He defied them.

"Are you ha-happy to see me?" Talking and breathing hurt so he had to pause, force the words out. "Because I—" He lifted his chin and a severe shock of pain sliced through his skull, graying his vision for a moment. "I missed you, Nieto." He licked the blood off his bottom lip. "It is so m-much fun wh-when you are here."

It was. When Daniel was around, they played the game, the one where Daniel got to be God. He killed Stavros then brought him back. He had never been scared of death. Now, thanks to Daniel, he knew what awaited him on the other side.

The entrance to the cage swung open and Daniel walked inside. Tall and skinny, clad in head to toe black, foreboding eyes gleaming as they

remained focus on Stavros. The closer he got, the more Stavros prepared himself mentally.

The only thing predictable about Daniel Nieto was his unpredictability.

Stavros found it…fascinating.

“Mr. Konstantinou.” Daniel knelt next to him, a knee in the small puddle of blood congealing on the floor. He touched Stavros, a hand with no glove, on the back of his neck.

Fingers sinking in and gripping tight as he yanked Stavros’ head back.

He gritted his teeth, eyes watering at the pain.

“I am glad you’re alert,” Daniel murmured. “What comes next, you must witness it.”

Stavros made himself smile, weakness would never be something he’d willingly show. Inside his chest, though, he was a frozen block of ice. The unpredictability of Daniel Nieto, the thing that fascinated him?

It scared him once, when Stavros came awake and found a very alive likeness of his dead stepsister, Annika, naked on top of him. Writhing, begging him to touch her.

To take her.

For a moment he’d been happy to be dead. To be with her. To finally have what he’d pined for since her mother married his father when they were both teenagers.

So yes, he’d given in to her lips and her touch. Something he hadn’t dared do when she’d been alive. Because she’d never allowed it. Oh yeah, she’d tease him with it. She’d make him think he had a shot at getting it, but at the last second she always snatched herself away from him.

This time was no different. Save for her soft hands around his throat, squeezing hard.

Just the way he liked it.

Annika knew all of him, all his kinks. But her caress had been a lie. Her face, too. She’d been an imposter, conjured up by Daniel, who it appeared knew more than Stavros had credited him.

Underestimating the enemy was a deadly mistake.

“I am ready,” he told Daniel in halting words. “Whatever you have, throw it at me. Along with a steak.” That bread and water shit was not cutting it. The beatings, delivered on an almost daily basis by the sour-faced Henan, coupled with the cold and hunger had him in a state of physical weakness he couldn’t properly describe.

Daniel’s mouth curved. It was a cruel mouth, set in a harsh face. Stavros always admired cruelty. That didn’t change, not even in this moment, and out of all the things that should have had him despairing of his tenuous grasp on sanity, his admiration of Daniel Nieto’s mouth was nowhere on that list.

“I think I would have liked you,” Daniel said. “If you weren’t reckless, faithless.” The hand on Stavros’ neck gentled then fell away. “If you hadn’t taken away the most important thing in my life.”

It was conversational, Daniel’s tone, but goosebumps burst across Stavros’ naked skin. Crying out a warning, putting him on guard, and not a moment too soon. The pain in his left side made him gasp and he tore his focus from Daniel’s face to look down. A knife was there, Daniel’s hand curved in a loving caress around the handle, knuckles grazing Stavros’ skin as blood ran down to join the already drying puddle on the cold floor.

Nieto wanted Stavros to beg for death. To beg for the torture to stop.

His vision wavered, and a traitorous sound fell from his lips as he lifted a hand. Slowly. He touched the arm of the man holding the blade inside him. A new wound to add to the countless others he’d acquired since coming awake inside Daniel’s cage for the first time.

Wounds upon wounds.

This one, like the others before, would bleed and hurt and scar. But it wouldn’t endanger his life, not yet. Daniel wanted him to suffer. Stavros had to be alive for that.

He didn’t have strength to do more than cling to Daniel’s wet and slippery grasp as his captor pulled the knife out. The suctioning sound it made, Stavros wasn’t unfamiliar with it. The warmth of his blood chased some of the chill away, and he held up his hand in front of his face, staring at the dripping red on his fingers.

“You like it when I bleed.” Even to his ears, his words were shakier than normal. Faint.

“You do it so well.” Daniel’s sounded weirdly proud, like he approved of the rivulets soaking Stavros’ hip and the tiny puddle congealing next to them. “Also it brings me such pleasure, watching you suffer.”

Stavros was fading, but he brought his bloodied fingers to his mouth, licking the red away one by one—was it all his, or maybe some of Daniel’s blood was mixed up in there, too?—as he held Daniel’s gaze. “It brings me pleasure…” His voice got softer and softer, slurring, vision narrowing down

to the man next to him who wore Stavros' death mark tattooed around his neck. The man with impenetrable eyes and that beautifully cruel mouth. "Watching you try."

"How is our mutual friend?" Syren Rua sat back, legs stretched out and ankles crossed as he regarded Daniel with a mildly curious expression. "Still alive, I hope?"

His non-affected tone didn't fool Daniel for a minute. Syren didn't do or say anything that didn't have a deeper reason. Daniel liked that about him.

Made him tolerable.

"You can hope."

"You know you can't kill him."

Syren didn't look away or back down when Daniel stared at him. He'd learned a long time ago that he didn't scare the diminutive man with shocked-white hair and eyes the same shade as the lavender plants Petra used to grow in her garden.

"Do I?" He issued the challenge, but Syren simply rolled his eyes.

"Yes, you know." Syren stood and strode past him to stare out the window of his condo, ten floors up in a building located downtown Atlanta. "Do whatever you want with Stavros," Syren said when he turned back to Daniel. "But you keep him alive. You need him."

That was a laughable notion. "He must die," he said it without anger, because it took a lot to anger him nowadays. "It is inevitable."

"Oh?" Syren held up a finger, the nail painted a vibrant purple. "Why did you wait so long to make your move?"

That had to be a rhetorical question, because Syren knew why the delay. Close friends with the leader of the task force formed to take down Daniel's business, Syren had been the one to keep Daniel in the loop about the Feds' moves against the Nietos. He knew Daniel's commitment had been to the confused woman he'd left behind, the one losing her mind with every tick of the clock.

Syren had been a part of that five man group who sent Stavros after Daniel. His vote the only nay. In the aftermath, Syren had reached out to Daniel with an offer to help get back what had been taken away.

They could restore his freedom.

But what happened to Petra could never be undone. In her place, Daniel opted for revenge. To which Syren never batted an eye.

As someone who'd gone undercover inside a criminal organization to avenge the slaughter of his family, Syren had to know that things like this… they took planning. They took time. And above all they took patience.

Daniel didn't say all that to Syren now, but the small man, clad in a form-fitting dark gray suit, the jacket buttoned over a black shirt and dark-brown leather shoes, watched him as though he'd read everything direct from Daniel's brain.

"Tell me something…" Syren retook his seat, flicking an invisible something off the lapel of his jacket. "And feel free to answer honestly, m'kay? When you take your blade to Stavros' flesh, is it the sight of blood that excites you and keeps you going?" He held Daniel's gaze, eyes speaking louder than his voice, saying he already knew the answer. "Or is it the sight of Stavros Konstantinou's blood that does the trick?"

Daniel narrowed his gaze.

"Is it the thought of making him pay for what he did to Petra that gets your blood racing and your control fraying? Or is it simply the thought of him? The sight of him that undoes you?" Syren held up a hand. "Because I have to tell you, no matter how much you try to hide it…you are coming undone, my friend."

They weren't friends. Barely could they be considered acquaintances.

"You mistake me for someone who ever loses control, *amigo*," he growled, and Syren's lips quirked. "Do not speak of what you do not know."

"If you say so." Hands lifted in surrender, gaze mocking, Syren asked, "What's your next move?"

"Already in motion." Daniel stood. "I must go." He couldn't listen to Syren anymore. He had to deal with the Brazilian in business, but he refused to let it drift over to personal.

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CHAPTER FIVE

P*lop. Plop.*

Blood dripped into the metal bucket steadily. Just small drops, but they amounted to quite a good bit. Collecting in that medium-sized bucket, filling up his nostrils with that unmissable scent.

Coppery.

It was an addiction, he was coming to admit. The need to see the man who'd harmed his wife bleed.

Suspended upside down, the naked Stavros was held in place by chains that lopped around his neck, hung down his torso to his bound wrists then continued on to his ankles. The shackles at his ankles dangled from a large hook extending from the high ceiling. Skin pale from the loss of blood, darkly purple bruises decorating his body, Stavros was soaked from sweat and blood. Aside from the occasional groan that seemed to escape him involuntarily, he remained quiet. His lips were chapped and peeling, but his eyes stayed closed, breath choppy as his face got almost as brightly colored as the blood that dripped from him.

Plop. Plop.

Daniel shifted from his position, leaning against the bars of the cage, arms folded. He nodded to the man next to him.

"Do it."

Henan stepped into the cage and Daniel followed closely. He liked to watch these things. Make sure they were done right. The way he wanted.

Henan picked up the high-powered hose and pointed it at Stavros' face, then he turned the power on.

Stavros jerked violently with a loud gurgle.

Daniel smiled.

Ice-cold water, directly onto his captive's face. Stavros could twist only so much. There was no escaping that hose and the water. Daniel knew how it felt, too. Like a million tiny needles were flying into your skin at once, at top speed, embedding in your bones. Freezing you from the inside out.

Water flooded the floor, sloshing up against his boots before sliding down the angled floor and circling the drain. This cage was built for this.

He watched dispassionately as Stavros fought a futile battle to escape the hose. Failing. Every jerk caused the chain around his neck to tighten and bite deeper into his throat.

If Daniel was lucky, Stavros might even come away with a tattoo around his throat, much like the one he'd given Daniel the night he'd killed his wife.

"Enough," he told Henan softly.

Henan immediately dropped the hose.

Daniel dropped to his knees to be face to face with a sputtering Stavros. His captive's lips were blue, teeth chattering as he wheezed.

It was…beautiful.

"Mr. Konstantinou." He grabbed Stavros by the chin, holding his bobbing head in place. Water dripped from his hair, streaming from his nose and ears, bubbling past his lips when he coughed long and loud.

"Ni-Nieto." Stavros' words trembled badly, but when he opened his red-rimmed eyes, they mocked Daniel. "Didn't I—" His throat convulsed and his eyes rolled back in his head. His lashes dropped then lifted again. "Didn't I say call me Stavros?"

"You fascinate me, Mr. Konstantinou. I wish to cut you open, dissect you," Daniel murmured. "To see what makes you tick. What drives you."

Stavros' laugh quickly turned into a fit of hacking cough, rocking his body as it hung upside down from the hook. "D-do you read minds, Nieto?" Wrists tied together at his front, his fingers—the tips also tinged with blue—twitched. "Because I was th-thinking I'd love to finish what I started." His gaze held a challenge even as he swung from the chains. "You know, carve your chest open. See if the tin man has a heart."

"Get him down," he told Henan, without taking his gaze from Stavros as he stood. "We're not done," he directed that last bit to Stavros.

“Hey, N-Nieto, have you noticed that you keep kneeling for me?” Stavros asked in a rush. His teeth sank into his peeling bottom lip, halting their trembling. “I like it.” Eyes swollen, teeth chattering loudly, he still managed to wink at Daniel. “You should always be on your knees.”

His defiance was just about as fascinating as his suffering. Daniel smiled. “You give excellent conversation, Mr. Konstantinou.”

“M-My bed partners didn’t keep me around for just my wonderful physique and amazing prowess.”

From what Daniel witnessed while surveilling Stavros, the Greek didn’t keep bed partners around for longer than the length of time it took to get the deed done. But it didn’t matter, so he didn’t speak on it. Instead he turned and walked out the cage.

“Don’t stay away too long.” Stavros’ halting words drifted to him. “I’ll be waiting impatiently for the next time you take a knee for me.”

He’d lost track of the last time he’d eaten. They’d served up more pain than he’d experienced in a long time, and drained him of more blood than he’d thought it possible to lose.

But the most pressing thing for Stavros at the moment was food. He closed his eyes, trying to smell anything but the waste of his own body. Countless days and nights chained up inside this cage. The sporadic feedings, and the torture. If it wasn’t for the no food or water for days thing, he’d actually like it here in this frozen, damp and dank dungeon.

Been a long time since his last vacation.

Lying on the cold floor where he’d been when they finished trying to drown him, he shifted his weight gingerly from his swollen left side to the equally swollen right. His throat burned from the pressure of the chains that had been wrapped around his neck. His ankles. His wrists. They all hurt. He wouldn’t be surprised if his fingers were broken. They were useless now from him grabbing and twisting on the chains.

There was no way he could get on his feet, not with the chains or the way his entire body hurt, but he suspected his legs would be useless in holding him up.

The sound of steady footsteps against the cement floor made him twitch, but he could do nothing more except lay there and wait. The smell

of food hit him just as a heavy boot landed on his back.

It wasn't Daniel.

He didn't have to open his eyes to know the newcomer was Henan, with the anger and the snake-like quality.

"Up," Henan barked. He kicked the back of Stavros' head.

It hurt—what didn't hurt anymore?—but making a sound took too much effort. Plus he didn't want to do anything that could make the food he smelled go away. His stomach cramped, raw and painful. He rolled as much as he could onto his belly, wincing, biting the inside of his cheek. Then struggled to a crouch before lifting his head.

Henan had turned on the light above the gate of the cage, and he stood there, a plate of food in his hand as he watched Stavros. He wasn't a tall man, that Henan. He reminded Stavros of a steroid-riddled bodybuilder, barrel-chested, back rounded off as he walked with his heels barely touching the ground. Small shaved head, face in a perpetual scowl, muscles bulging, veins protruding.

He didn't speak much, following the orders of the man in charge. Those orders seemed to keep an otherwise unhinged Henan in check.

"Hungry, huh?" Henan's accent was thick, difficult to cut through.

At his question, Stavros shrugged. "I wouldn't turn down a steak." His words emerged slurred and slow, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"You can have this." Henan held out the plate, and Stavros' taste buds immediately came alive, flooding his mouth with saliva when he spotted eggs and bread. "If you beg."

Oh. Well then. "I don't know if you're aware of this," he leaned forward, speaking softly as though sharing a secret. "But I don't beg. Not for anything. Or anyone."

Henan chuckled. "If you want this—" The laughter went away quickly. "You beg."

Stavros sighed. Obviously he'd be getting no sustenance any time soon. "Listen, tell *el jefe* hiding out there if he wants me to beg, he can try to make me, himself. I'm not going anywhere."

He blamed his swollen right eye for his inability to see Henan's booted foot headed his way. The kick to his face knocked Stavros backward and as he fell, so did the kicks.

Shit.

He tried to curl into a ball, to cover his face, but the chains restricted his movement, leaving him open and more than vulnerable to the steel-toed boots. Blood flooded his mouth and slid down his throat, choking him. He coughed and sputtered, dragging his battered body along the cold floor in an attempt to get away from Henan's insistent boot, but there was only so far he could go.

There was no fighting back, no escaping. Which meant he had to lay there and get kicked within an inch of his life. Of course, because Nieto didn't want him dead.

Not yet.

The pain blinded him. His moans, ragged and wet, hit his ears and Stavros cringed at that sound as much as the pain itself. He hated being weak and vulnerable. This situation was the epitome of it.

No way out. No escape.

Just this, day in and day out.

A particularly vicious blow slammed his head down onto the concrete, and he must have blacked out because the next thing he knew, a hot steady stream of liquid was pouring down on him.

He groaned, lashes fluttering open. On his back, he gazed up through hazy, shifting vision to see Henan standing over him, his zipper down.

His cock out.

Peeing on him.

When the other man noticed Stavros' opened eyes, he grinned and aimed higher.

His face.

The urine splashed onto his left cheek, getting into his nose. His mouth.

Stavros' body refused to budge. Refused to turn away. Nothing worked except his mind and his eyes as he lay there, dreaming of all the ways he'd make Henan pay.

All the ways he'd make Daniel Nieto pay.

He faded on that cold floor, body broken, soaked in blood and urine. He faded as Henan exited the cage with the food.

He snapped awake coughing, throat and mouth so dry they felt tight, cracked. Stavros tried lifting his head and a small cry left him when pain assaulted him. He dropped back onto the floor as he panted. The mixed, arid stench of urine and blood assaulted his nostrils, burning his nose and eyes.

He dry-heaved.

Water.

He needed water.

His throat hurt, it was so dry. He didn't have to touch his face to know layers of blood were caked on there. Again, he brought his head up, ready for the pain, but still unable to smother the snarl that ache brought to his lips. He managed a semi-sitting position and looked around.

The light was out, but a small puddle of liquid glistened over in the corner, near the drain. A tight clicking sound echoed in his ears when he attempted to swallow. The pain in his stomach went beyond hunger, beyond anything. The emptiness seemed to settle into his bones.

But water.

He needed water. So he crawled toward that small puddle, a little bigger than the size of a silver dollar. Water that must have settled there after his semi-drowning earlier. Once he reached his goal, Stavros bent and lapped at it.

It was warm.

But liquid.

Bitter with another weird taste.

Maybe salt.

He jerked his mouth away.

Was he licking up Henan's urine?

Liquid.

He'd worry about it all later, another time when he wasn't about to faint from lack of water. He bent again, sniffing at it, refusing to acknowledge what he was doing. How low he crouched, literally and figuratively. Tongue scraping at the ground, he lapped. The moisture burning his lips and the cuts on his chin.

But…liquid. Soon it was all gone, but he stayed bent over, tongue to the floor, heaving.

Refusing to believe this was him. Stavros Konstantinou.

"Mr. Konstantinou." The light in the cage clicked on. "You don't look so good."

Stavros stiffened at Daniel's voice, but he didn't lift his head, too angry at himself at getting like this. Even chained and bloodied, he'd had a sort of advantage. Now, it was gone.

“Nothing to say?” Daniel’s footsteps grew closer until he was inside the cage with Stavros, standing just a few paces away.

Stavros remained on his hands and knees, naked ass in the air, but he did look up into Daniel’s mocking daze. “You should kill me,” he rasped. “The sooner, the better.”

“Oh?” Daniel’s lips quirked as he pushed away from his position and crouched down next to Stavros. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I’ll kill you,” Stavros told him. “But not before I gut Henan and hang him up by his entrails.”

Daniel’s nose wrinkled. “That is very specific. But you know, Mr. Konstantinou, I’m not going to kill you. Not yet anyway.”

Stavros sat up fully, gritting his teeth at the energy that simple action took. Energy he didn’t have. “Your plan is to starve me to death slowly?”

“Henan brought you food earlier, did he not?” Daniel lifted an eyebrow. “I’m told you didn’t eat it. Something about refusing to beg for it.” He eyed Stavros up and down. “Shame.”

“You watched me, didn’t you?” Stavros asked him. “You think you know me, don’t you? When you were beating off to images of me while hiding in my bushes, did you see anything that made you think I was the one who did the begging?”

“No.” Daniel leaned over, so close Stavros could smell the coffee on his breath. “I also didn’t see anything about you liking golden showers, but here you are—” He nodded to where Stavros had been crouched not even a minute ago. “Dragging your tongue all over my floor in search of more piss.”

The laughter in his tone was hard to miss, so Stavros allowed the humiliation to wash over him for only a second. Just that, because he didn’t have the time for anything else. “We do what we have to in order to survive.”

“I agree.” Daniel cocked his head and licked his delectable lips—damn his lips—before his teeth flashed. “But I think it’s funny—in a hilarious sort of way—that you think you can survive me.”

His confidence was the most attractive thing Stavros had ever witnessed. He’d been around the most gorgeous men and women. But it was the cool and calm way that Daniel Nieto talked about killing him that had Stavros’ battered body attempting to stir.

They had moved way beyond twisted and were flirting with sick now.

Unsurprisingly, Stavros was cool with that.

“How long do you plan on keeping me here?” He’d asked the question before. He’d ask it again.

“How long do you think?” Daniel shifted, gaze mocking. “I don’t need to know anything from you. There are no questions I need answered, no information I seek.” His mouth curved even as that familiar darkness in his eyes got deeper, pulling at Stavros. “This is pleasure. I’m taking from you because you took from me.”

“To make yourself feel better.”

Pity flashed in Daniel’s eyes. Pity. For Stavros. “Nothing will make me feel better. I know enough to know that.”

Stavros brought his bound hands up and to his credit, Daniel didn’t move or even bat an eyelash when Stavros touched his chin with bloodied and broken fingers. “I like your voice,” he whispered. “Do you tell people who gave it to you?” He remembered wrapping the garrote around Daniel’s throat while he slept with his wife next to him in that luxurious California King. Fight of his life, that night. He’d been rock hard in the aftermath, so he’d gotten high, gotten fucked, coming nice and long with the memory of Daniel Nieto struggling underneath him. “You tell them the name of the man who got close enough to scar you permanently?”

Daniel grinned. And fuck him, but it was vicious. No way that grin didn’t taste the way it looked. Stavros’ mouth watered.

“I like my scars,” Daniel said softly. Succinctly. “They tell me where I’ve been. What I’ve survived. We both know you will never get the same options.” He moved away from Stavros’ touch then. “Because you will never survive me.”

Stavros wanted to punish him for that verbal mike drop, but there was nothing he could do except watch as Daniel got to his feet and motioned toward the entrance of the cage.

Henan appeared, and Stavros stared daggers at the fucker while Henan grinned back at him.

“Time for your bath, Mr. Konstantinou,” Daniel said. “You smell like hunger.” He turned away then paused, looking back at Stavros over his shoulder. “And piss.”

Son of a—

The force of the hose hit him.

Painful. Yes, of course.

But water.
So he gave a mental shrug and curled up on the floor until it was over.

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CHAPTER SIX

Once a month, Daniel made a trip to Seattle, to see the little brother nobody was supposed to know existed. At twenty-one, his mother sat both Daniel and Antonio down and confessed that they had another brother. She'd hidden her pregnancy from her husband because she didn't want Eduardo Nieto's influence to corrupt yet another child. So she'd spent most of her pregnancy in the States with a relative and gave her third child up for adoption.

The news came as a shock. How could it not? But Daniel understood. Growing up as Eduardo's son, he understood his mother's choice. She'd watched her husband groom their two eldest sons, attempting to pit them against each other in a bid to turn them into younger versions of himself. In her shoes, Daniel would likely have done the same. She begged them to keep their baby brother safe by staying away. So they had. No one knew about Levi except for the three of them. Or so they thought.

The FBI found out about Levi any way, and they launched a campaign to find out if he knew about the cartel business. If he was as involved in it as Daniel and Antonio.

They planted an agent in Levi's life. A man Levi loved and married under false pretenses, until the day he found out the truth. They shattered his brother's life, and when Daniel found out, he'd wanted blood.

Levi kept him calm for a while. But just as Daniel was about to slip off that leash, Levi's husband came back into his life. They made up, rebuilt their life and family, and were now remarried. His brother deserved to be

happy. At least Petra would say that. She would embrace the FBI agent Levi loved, and she'd want Daniel to reach out to family.

He did it for Petra. For the family they could have had, if he hadn't insisted on his world being too dangerous for a child. He'd disappointed her with that decision, driving her to silence.

Petra's silence scared him like nothing else. When she got loud, when they fought, they were all right. But when she got silent, when she faked the smiles and sought to hide the light that flared in her eyes at the sight of someone else's baby, he understood he'd wounded her mortally.

He'd changed his mind. Only it came a moment too late.

His past, present and future stolen away by Stavros Konstantinou.

Undone by that man?

Yes, once before. It wouldn't happen again.

Never.

In the quiet Seattle suburb, he sat in the back of the car, staring at the house across the street. Toro knew better than to ask questions, but Daniel felt his nephew's curiosity. He didn't know about Levi. No one in their family knew about the younger Nieto brother, save for Daniel and Antonio.

What Levi had inside that house, the family he'd built, Daniel didn't want to do anything to take it away. Levi deserved more than he'd gotten thus far. But he was all Daniel had, which meant he couldn't stay away. So once a month he came here and sat in the car outside the house, watching them.

Sometimes the window would be open, the blinds pulled back to show him Levi and his husband, laughing and loving. It made him feel like a part of it, while being apart from it. As long as his little brother was happy.

His mother had asked Antonio and Daniel to protect Levi. Keep him from their father. The business wasn't for him. They'd thought protection meant distance. Distance simply meant they'd had no clue when the FBI turned its attentions to Levi. Now, it didn't matter that he rarely made it past the front lawn of Levi's home. Daniel was staying close.

A rap of knuckles on the window to his right brought his mind back to the present. Donovan Cintron peered at him from the other side.

"Toro."

His nephew wound the window down, and Van nodded at Daniel. "You want to come inside?"

Yes. But he wouldn't. "How is he?" he asked instead.

The former FBI agent shrugged. “He’s good. He’d be better if you stopped lurking in the shadows and actually came inside sometime.”

Maybe they’d both be better, but Daniel wasn’t ready to be better. He might never be. “And the boy?” He inquired after his other nephew, Levi and Van’s son.

“Boy.” Van snorted. “He’s at college, and I’m not sure I want to know what he’s doing there.”

“Toro.” Daniel met his driver’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Privacy.” He hadn’t yet shared the news of just who Levi was to his nephew, and now wasn’t the time to do that.

A low click signaled the vehicle being unlocked then Toro got out. Daniel waved at Van. “Join me.”

Van didn’t hesitate to slide in to sit next to Daniel.

“I hear you left the FBI.”

Sprawled out on the black leather seat, Van watched him with a relaxed expression as he shrugged. “You heard correctly.” He leaned forward. “Why? Here to offer me a job?” He chuckled at that.

“I’m sure mi hermano menor would have something to say about that.”

“Yep.”

Daniel let the silence build for a while before he said, “I have Stavros Konstantinou.”

Van’s brow furrowed. “Have him how?”

“Right where I want him.” As the words left him, he wished they didn’t mean so much more than they should.

“Ah.”

That one word and the flicker behind Van’s eyes had Daniel’s gaze sharpening on the other man’s face. “You know.” He didn’t form it into a question. “You know what he’s done.”

“I do.” Van nodded once.

“What else do you know?”

“I mean…” Van pursed his lips. “I know he sent a man to kill me once. I know I’ve never met Stavros, and I really, really want to slit his throat.”

“He has that effect, yes.”

“Why is he still alive?” Van asked. “He killed your wife, man. That dude deserves the same fate.”

“I am aware of what he deserves.” He kept his voice even. “He will get that soon enough.”

Understanding dawned on his brother-in-law's face. "You want him to suffer."

Was suffer the right word? He grunted and Van seemed to take that for affirmation.

"Don't sleep on him, though. He lives for that savage shit."

"I know who Stavros Konstantinou is." He would never forget.

"Aight." Van glanced back to the house. "So you gonna come in or nah?"

"I am tying up loose ends, Agent Cintron. My enemies can't know about him."

Van sat up, expression fierce. "On that we agree."

"I am telling you so you can let him know that while I might stick to the shadows, I am never far away." It was a promise and a warning.

Van's gaze searched his before the other man nodded slowly. "Okay." He climbed out the car and leaned down to peer back at Daniel. "That Stavros situation. Watch yourself."

"Of course." He watched as Van walked up to his front door. The door opened, and Levi appeared, backlit from the light coming from inside the house. Clad casually in jeans and a t-shirt.

Van hugged him, whispered something to him, and Levi nodded, his gaze on the car. On Daniel. He shouldn't be able to see through the darkly tinted windows, but it felt as if he did anyway. As if he saw straight through to Daniel.

This was his brother. His sibling. His family.

When Petra died, he'd forgotten he had any other family out there. With his other brother, Antonio, in prison, beyond his reach, he'd forgotten about Levi. About Toro. Now that he was taking the steps necessary to get back into the light, the enormity of it all bowed his shoulders.

He stayed watching the house until Levi and Van went inside and locked the door behind them. Then he made Toro drive off.

At the airport, seated on the plane, waiting to take off, he picked up his phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"How are you?" he asked.

"If you'd come inside, I would be much better," Levi told him.

"Maybe not." He gazed out the window, at a plane taxiing off in the distance. "You know who I am." Which meant they couldn't be connected.

“Van told me what you said.”

“¿Y?”

“Maybe I don’t need you in the shadows. You ever thought about that?”

“Sí, I have.”

His little brother sighed. “But you won’t change your mind.”

“No.”

Levi remained silent for several heartbeats. “You’ll be careful?”

“I have not lived this long doing things any other way.” But he couldn’t deny having someone worry about him felt good. Petra and his mother had been the only ones who ever worried. Antonio had thought him invincible. And their father had no room in him for trivial things such as caring.

“Bye, Daniel.”

“Adiós, hermano.”

A fire danced in his lower belly, sending sparks shooting up and down his spine every time he set foot inside the cage. Restless, he waited, slick anticipation for his prey curling his fingers. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, making it that much harder to sit still.

Alive, for the first time in years. He felt alive.

Seated in a corner of the cage, cloaked by shadows, Daniel watched his captive writhe in his sleep, hoarse cries tearing from his throat. In his sleep, in his dreams, Stavros was a treasure trove of information. Watching him had been the only entertainment Daniel got while on the run.

Depravity was Stavros’ thing. His trysts with women had been eye-opening, but he hadn’t expected to see Stavros engage in the same acts with men. With the same vigor. The same abandon. He glutted on pleasure, while Daniel mourned the woman he’d lost. While his wife’s soul-shattering screams echoed in his ears until he felt sure they bled.

While Daniel sank under with the weight of the guilt and blame on his shoulders, Stavros Konstantinou lived a life of decadent indulgence. That wasn’t allowed to continue.

Now, he was Daniel’s entertainment. Breathing only at Daniel’s discretion.

A plaintive moan rumbled from the body on the floor. Stavros shifted, and Daniel heard his harsh intake of breath.

“Fuck,” Stavros swore, voice ragged and heavy with pain.

Daniel watched him, lips quirking as Stavros struggled to sit, chains rattling. If his stiff posture was any indication, he hurt all over.

The light in the cage remained off, casting the place in darkness. Still Daniel knew the sight of Stavros’ body by now. Caked from head to toe in streaked blood and grime, hair matted to his head. Swollen eyes and nose, the cut that had already scabbed over on his cheek, black and blue bruises decorated his taut midsection, unable to hide under all the dried blood.

He’d long lost the polished gentleman look about him, his tan fading with the lack of sunlight.

He never lost the fire in his eyes though. Never, and more often than not Daniel found himself facing that blaze head-on. He always barely escaped without getting singed.

“Watching me sleep, Nieto?” Stavros’ back remained facing Daniel, but his head was tilted to the right. The tension in his shoulders matched the same quality in his voice.

Daniel shrugged even though Stavros wasn’t looking at him. “I like to keep an eye on my captives.” He stood and went to the opening of the cage, switching on the overhead light before retaking his seat in the corner. “Besides, you sound like you needed company.”

Stavros scoffed. “Is that what you think I am, your captive?” He positioned himself, movements abbreviated, until they were facing each other. “Hardly.”

“What do you think you are?” Daniel asked him evenly. “Share.”

“I think I’m your mirror image.” He held Daniel’s gaze. “Like knows like, yes?” Stavros licked his chapped lips. “The monster in you recognizes the monster in me,” he whispered. “And it wants to play.”

Daniel just watched him, giving nothing away. Listening to words that somehow burned more than Stavros’ garrote at his throat.

“Do you know why nothing you do to me here matters?” Stavros asked in the same quiet tone. “Why, no matter how many times you bleed me, I won’t break? Why, no matter how long it takes you to feed me, I won’t beg?”

Daniel put his elbows on his knees, body leaning forward, eyes taking in every inch of Stavros’ battered body as his ears remained tuned to every sound, every cadence of his voice. “Tell me.”

“That night, when I killed your Petra—”

Just like every other time somebody uttered her name, Daniel's stomach lurched and his breath turned choppy. Uneven. He kept his face stoic and fisted his hands.

"When I had my garrote around your neck and your struggling body underneath me, you stared up into my eyes," Stavros said. "Remember that?"

He'd never forget.

"I had you near death," Stavros confessed. "And you had me near orgasm." He moved then, dragging along the floor, body angled toward Daniel, voice hushed as though he was sharing a secret. "The thought of taking your life, the act of watching you struggle to live, got me hard…" His eyes gleamed in the low light and for a single moment the tables were turned, upended.

Daniel found himself the vulnerable one. The captive. The one in chains.

"I got high that night," Stavros told him. "Got fucked, too." His mouth curved. "A ménage. Tightest pussy and ass. They made a human sandwich out of me, and I thought only of you in those moments. In *that* moment."

They were words meant to shock him. Meant to probably set Daniel off. He gave Stavros a tight smile. "I should be flattered, should I not?"

Stavros snorted. "No, you should be on notice. Because this? Me as your captive? It is only foreplay for the inevitable main course, where I plan on feasting on you until I'm well sated."

A slow smile spread across Daniel's face as he went to Stavros, getting down low on the filthy floor. Ignoring everything as he grabbed Stavros' chin, and stared him in the eye. "I like this side of you," Daniel murmured. "Defiant." Their verbal spars somehow had his spine sparking more than watching Stavros bleed. He hadn't thought anything could be as vibrant as spilling his captive's blood. "All that insolence, despite the danger."

The hair on Stavros' face pricked Daniel's palm, an awareness that registered loudly, drawing Daniel's attention. As did the warmth of Stavros' skin.

So warm.

Stavros' gaze never strayed from his. His stare was as gripping as everything else about him. Filled with rebellion and a bluster Daniel knew Stavros could back up. "Haven't you heard?" His focus dipped once, from

Daniel's eyes down to his mouth then back. A quick flicker. Almost imperceptible. Then Stavros licked his lips. "I live for danger."

That Daniel knew to be true. "Then you've come to the right place, Mr. Konstantinou." The pulse just under Stavros' chin throbbed against his fingertips, reminding him that he still held the other man in his clasp.

He tightened his grip.

That pulse sped up.

The warmth spread, and Daniel's body sucked it up. A dry sponge soaking up water.

With his free hand, Daniel pulled his blade from his boot. Because he hadn't done it in a while. Because he dreamt about Stavros Konstantinou skewered on his blade.

And because he wanted to remove that glint in Stavros' eyes.

He'd seen it before.

While Stavros eyed him, Daniel stroked his blade down the Greek's chest. "Tell me about Annika," he murmured. "The woman you loved. The one your male lover killed. Era tú hermana, ¿verdad?"

Stavros' expression didn't change, but his tone went from strong and cocky, to dry and bold when he asked, "Are we sharing details about our women?" His brow lifted. "If so, you should go first. You are the host, after all."

Daniel twisted his wrist just the smallest degree and the sharp side of the blade sliced across Stavros' chest, directly under his right pec. Not deep, but not superficial either.

Stavros tensed. Daniel felt him under his knuckles, under his fingertips. Tense, but that pulse…

Hypnotic.

For a crazy moment, he wanted to just hold himself still and count those pulsing beats.

The thinnest trail of blood appeared.

"She didn't want you," he whispered. "But she kept you leashed, didn't she?" He'd watched Stavros turn into somebody vulnerable with Annika, and he'd seen the woman use that weakness to keep Stavros at her side, but never in her bed. "Close, but never close enough."

"You're putting me to sleep, you know that?" Stavros asked. "That voice of yours. So soothing. You're welcome for that, by the way." He winked, and Daniel flicked his wrist again.

Another slash, this one on the opposite pec. Directly on top of a dark purple bruise. The red came through beautifully, tiny droplets already forming. Again Stavros tensed, and this time when he exhaled, it rushed across Daniel's neck.

Prickling his skin before settling in his toes that curled in on themselves.

He slashed Stavros again, a punishment for being so alive. So warm. Punishing him for every throb of his pulse against Daniel's fingertips. Punishing him for forcing Daniel to be aware of all of it. He'd thought he wanted a weak and vulnerable captive. But right now, Daniel preferred this one.

He preferred the fight and the word play.

Much more rewarding once you added the knife play. He kept cutting, blood dripping in thin lines down Stavros' torso. With every drag of the weapon across his flesh, Stavros tensed, but he didn't flinch. He exhaled, but he didn't look away. Silent, mocking gaze urging Daniel to do his worst.

He wouldn't, not yet. But this was a good warm up exercise.

"Annika let everybody but you touch her," he said softly. "She let you watch. Made sure you did. Then she betrayed you in the end." He'd been lurking in the shadows of Stavros Konstantinou's life for longer than the other man could possibly know. "But you mourned her like a lover, not a sister."

The flicker in Stavros' eyes told him he'd hit a nerve.

"She said your name," Stavros said. "Petra. Remember that? Remember how she reached out her hand for you while my men held you down?"

Daniel's movements halted as a red haze crept over his vision. He breathed deeply, hoping his expression remained impassive.

"You don't look so good." Stavros' teeth flashed, shark-like. "Something I said?"

It made no sense that Stavros was the captive when Daniel felt suddenly constrained by the weight of grief that abruptly landed on his shoulders. Petra would always be his weak spot, and a man like Stavros would know that.

"She didn't fight after that. She accepted the inevitable. Graceful," Stavros mused aloud. "Deserving of more than you gave."

"Sigue hablando." *Keep talking.* Daniel kept slicing until his grip turned slack on the hilt of the knife, and Stavros' front was swathed in wet, sticky red.

Beautiful, hypnotic red.

As Daniel sat back and regarded his handiwork, Stavros' stomach contracted.

"You really do like to watch, don't you?" Stavros' chuckle sounded as if the man was intoxicated. His lashes were low, brushing his pale cheekbones as they hid his thoughts from Nieto. "Shit, you're a goddamn treasure, Nieto."

Daniel fisted Stavros' hair, yanking his head back. Then he brought the knife up, tracing an invisible line across Stavros' throat.

Ear to ear.

His captive held himself still then.

Lips clamped shut then.

But his eyes were wide open. Gaze heavy.

Accepting as he waited.

But he knew, he had to know…

"Not today," Daniel told him. "I like this." He brought the bloodied knife up, pressing the flat of the blade against Stavros' lips, the sharp tip pointed up past his nose.

Stavros' tongue flicked out and he licked the blade. Against him, Daniel felt the other man's shudder. As close as they were, he saw Stavros' pupils dilate.

"Foreplay," Stavros whispered. He held Daniel's gaze as he slid his tongue over the knife again. "Fuck, but you're exceptional at it."

Words and thought took a backseat as Daniel watched Stavros use his tongue to wipe the knife clean. Caught in that unexpectedly intoxicating web, he couldn't look away. Shock turned his belly warm, tightened it, and he froze.

Holding his breath.

Gripping the knife.

He flashed hot, instantly sweating. Something else filtered in, pushing past the anger inside. Past the rage, and the thirst for blood. Settling in low in his gut.

An ache. Familiar, yet not. An intense urge to join in gripped him. A need to put his mouth right there on that sharp, polished steel and lick until there wasn't any red left.

His entire being spasmed at that realization.

What it meant.

He rejected it outright. But when Stavros opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out, Daniel slid the knife down for him. So the Greek could get at the rest of the blood. Lick it off and shudder again.

Completely insane and obscene.

Daniel's mouth watered. He liked obscene. In fact, he didn't know any other way but obscene.

Judging by the way his lips curved, Stavros knew.

Like knows like.

The knife fell from his finger, clattering to the floor as Stavros' wet tongue curled around Daniel's blood-soaked fingers. He snatched it away, schooled his features, and stood.

"That heat in your belly," Stavros spoke, head tilted back, lashes lowered as he gazed up at Daniel as if he wasn't the one shackled to the cold floor. "That's for me." His teeth caught his bottom lip then released it. "And it's because of me."

"So sure of yourself, Mr. Konstantinou?" His voice was more wrecked than usual, and Daniel fisted his hands at that show of weakness.

"No. I'm sure of you."

If he did what he wanted in that moment, he'd have the knife buried to the hilt in the Greek's heart. But that would be an emotional blow. It couldn't be about emotion, because emotion would end all this before it'd truly begun. Therefore he turned around and exited the cage.

That action felt very much like a retreat. A surrender. It occurred to Daniel that he'd done too much of that since the day Stavros first opened his eyes in his cage.

"Thank you for the knee," Stavros called after him. "I always appreciate a man who kneels."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Somewhere deep inside, Stavros recognized the dream. Somewhere deep inside, alarm bells clanged, determined to rouse him. But he was too tired. In too much pain. Too hungry. Too thirsty.

Too everything.

Which made his defenses crumble to dust when she came to him.

The last time she tried to take this route, he'd shot her down. Pushed her away. Unable to handle what changing their relationship from brother and sister to lovers could mean to their parents.

But she came to him now and he did nothing but watch her get on her knees for him. He'd fantasized about that. She touched him, surprisingly callous fingers.

Unfamiliar hands.

But she smelled…like Annika.

Like sex. Intoxicating heat that circled his throat, choked him, and roused the hairs on his nape.

"Stav." She didn't sound like Annika. This person's voice was too throaty, too thick. And there was the accent.

But she touched him, rough grip on his naked and bruised-up hip. He arched. Still, he managed to croak, "No."

"I'm here, Stav."

Except she wasn't. Annika was dead. He had to keep repeating the words, letting them fill his fogged brain. Annika was dead. So how could she be splayed between his thighs, warm breath on his lower belly, strong hands gripping his rapidly hardening shaft?

“No.” He couldn’t move, except his hips jerked forward, pushing him firmer into that grip. “No, Annika. Stop.”

They couldn’t do this. Their father had forbidden it, and Stavros didn’t want Annika to ever feel the kind of punishment the old man liked to inflict when someone went against his edict. She couldn’t handle it.

Dry fingers drifted between his ass cheeks, rubbing his taint. His belly contracted as he tried to twist away. He couldn’t. Nowhere to go, except deeper into the hot mouth that descended around his now fully erect shaft.

Surrounding him.

Stavros choked. “Stop.” His chest heaved. She didn’t understand. She didn’t know what awaited on the other side of this. She didn’t seem to care, sucking him hard, pulling on him as he begged her to stop.

His body wanted it, the hazy heat spreading quickly to warm his frozen limbs. Making his entire body throb in pain. His heart raced, cock pulsing fast. But his mind refused to succumb. He didn’t want this. Not that he didn’t want her. He’d always want her. But he had to protect her from herself, from their father.

“Nika, please.”

“Mmm.” She licked his crown, and he hissed out a breath. She breached him dry with two fingers. Another thing that hurt, but his body liked it. Was accustomed to it, and grew harder from that painful burn of invasion.

He cried out, bucking hard. “Fuck.” She never failed to turn him into someone he hated. Just like now. He hated that his body needed her so badly, that he couldn’t stop himself from thrusting deeper into her hungry throat.

He hated that she was the weakness he never managed to shake. He hated that he couldn’t touch her.

His hands.

Bound and chained.

Daniel’s dungeon.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

Not Annika.

Who?

Fingers sawed in and out of him, burning. So damn good. Anger got twisted up with the pleasure and pain he was helpless to escape. It wasn’t Annika. He couldn’t see anything with the blindfold over his eyes, but the fingers inside him were thicker, palm rougher.

Warm, wet mouth tightened around his cock, sucking him hard. Intent on pulling everything he had left straight through his dick.

“Stav.”

His heart lurched. She sounded like Annika. Smelled like her. How was that possible? “Annika.” The words croaked from a throat turned raw by the lack of hydration.

She’d died, hadn’t she? Killed because she betrayed him, betrayed their family. He’d mourned her, hadn’t he? Images crowded his mind, of him sitting next to her tombstone, punishing himself with the what-ifs. The what-might-have-beens.

But he loved her, and in this space he couldn’t deny her.

Or himself.

The fingers rammed into him harder, deeper. His body clenched around the digits, ass pushing back. Mind and body were two separate things. Acting independently of each other. His body needed the sloppy suction of mouth bathing his throbbing cock in slick saliva that dripped down to soak his crack.

His mind kept trying to refuse to accept the pleasure. “Fuck. No. No.” He choked, trapped by his body and the pulsing desire that upped the pain factor.

Too good. This was his thing. What he liked, all wrapped up in a bow and handed to him. Pain thinly disguising the pleasure. Both sensations a noose around his neck.

Robbing him of breath.

Drained of strength, he went. Body tight, every inch of his skin bruised and battered. His moans, he couldn’t decipher if they were of the pained variety. Or stemmed from the heady thought that he finally had Annika touching on him like he’d dreamt for so long.

He craved her. For years he’d had to make do without her, and now she was here.

“Please. Nika,” he begged, hoarse and slurry, until his delirious mind turned itself right side up again and he remembered she wasn’t there. She couldn’t be.

He raged, roaring, smothered by the inability to do anything more than feel what he’d wanted for so long.

But this was the wrong place. Wrong time. And whoever it was stretching his ass wide with thick fingers and soaking his dick in saliva was

the wrong person.

He didn’t want them, but his body wanted the touch. The deep scour of nails along his upper thigh that made his balls ache. He needed that. The dig of teeth on his cock. He’d pined for it.

Every single time the word *no* scratched at his throat, the person between his legs jammed the fingers deeper.

He writhed.

Teeth sank into his length.

He bucked.

The sounds Annika made when she had a cock in her mouth, or in her cunt. He heard those sounds now. She’d tortured him back then too, fucking his friends, his lovers, holding orgies with him in the same room. She used him, debased what he felt for her. And for all of that he loved her more.

Craved her more.

When she pushed him away, he always found a way to stay close. And her depravity? The thought of it inflamed him now, turning his already hard shaft into something capable of smashing diamonds.

“Not Annika,” he panted, struggling to separate his fantasies from reality.

Her mouth went away, hot breath burning his wet crown as she breathed against him. Rough-hewn hands gripped him, tugging, squeezing so hard he wheezed, ass lifting off the cold floor he’d long stopped feeling.

“Stav.” His name. Her lips.

His climax, violent and unending.

“Stav.” She chanted his name, teasing, testing him the way she always did. Intent on pushing him far beyond what he’d allow.

Always, he’d resisted.

Not today. The old man would find out, because he always did. And their punishment would be swift. Father believed in the scorched earth approach. He had to protect Annika. Had to keep her safe.

His head lolled back onto the floor, head spinning, body spasming from the cold, from the loss of body heat, and his orgasm. Something was wrong. He felt it, but he was so tired.

So cold.

“Annika.” He tried to reach out a hand, but couldn’t. He was shackled, chained.

Captive.

No. A trick. It was all a trick. His chills got worse, but there was nothing he could do. His head spun and every single wound on his body pounded in pain.

Daniel Nieto.

This time the ice that encased his spine was all fear. Daniel knew too much. Before, Stavros had been sure there was no way his captor could break him.

Now?

He'd begged. He'd pleaded. Daniel had known exactly what to do, which buttons to push, to get those responses from him. Stavros breaking didn't seem like delusions of grandeur on Daniel's part anymore.

It was looking more and more like a foregone conclusion.

He wasn't sure how many days passed since the Annika incident. Henan was the only person he saw. Henan, who fed him twice a day now, and lengthened the chain to allow Stavros to move about. He also washed Stavros. Although wash was a bit nice. He pointed a hose at Stavros and blasted him with cold water for a few minutes.

He got clothes. Thin sweatpants, and a cotton t-shirt.

So, he'd been rewarded for the Annika thing?

Her name was Wilhelmina, the woman who'd given the pleasure his mind refused to accept. Pleasure his body soaked up like a sunbather soaking up sunshine at the beach. Stavros had wracked his jumbled brain in an attempt to figure out why she'd felt strange yet familiar.

She'd been the one to strangle him before, playing the same Annika role. It appeared Daniel kept her on the roster. She was beautiful, he remembered thinking that the first time she'd strode into the cage. She'd reminded him a little of Annika even then. Same dark skin, commanding physique, and ruthless personality.

Of course, unlike Annika, Wilhelmina had a size 38D chest, and a cock between her legs. She worked for Daniel. Did she also sleep with him?

A rattle of the cage jerked his head up. His breath hitched.

Daniel stood just outside the cage, watching him. Expressionless, but his eyes. They mocked Stavros.

He knew.

“Mr. Nieto.” Stavros licked his lips. “Back from your vacation?”

The corners of Daniel’s mouth twitched, like he was fighting a smile. Stavros tried to act like Daniel Nieto smiling on the regular wasn’t something he’d pay good money to see.

Daniel motioned with his head to Henan, who rushed to unlock the cage. “Take a break, Henan.” Daniel dismissed his henchman then waited until Henan disappeared before he walked into the cage.

Not walked.

More like stalked, because Stavros felt very much like his prey in that moment. Daniel’s gaze stayed on his face, examining him as he crouched down so they could be face to face.

“You know I like that,” Stavros murmured, lifting his chin slightly. “Daniel Nieto on his knees for me.” He couldn’t help himself, poking the hornet’s nest, but Jesus, Daniel’s very presence baited him. “I dream about it.”

“What else do you dream about, Greek?” Daniel’s teeth appeared briefly. “Or do I already know?”

Humiliation, so foreign, shivered in Stavros’ belly. Still, he shrugged with all of the nonchalance he didn’t feel. “We should allow some mystery between us, don’t you think?”

“I think, the way you beg—” Daniel put his mouth to Stavros’ ear. “Es espectacular.”

Stavros shivered, and it might have had everything to do with the rolling of the ‘Rs’, mixed with Daniel’s wrecked voice and warm breath on his skin. His captor aroused him, and Stavros didn’t care to hide that fact.

Not anymore.

“I don’t beg for you,” he said.

Daniel pulled back, lips curled into a condescending smile. “No?” He shoved one hand into his pocket then pulled out a small, black device almost swallowed up by his large palm.

“Please. Please.”

Stavros’ cries filled the cage. They’d taped it. Heated anger had him seeing red. Still, he swallowed it, affecting a bored expression as Daniel watched his face and listened to him beg.

Jesus.

“Annika. Please.”

“Espectacular.”

“I don’t beg for you,” Stavros told him again. He thrust his head forward, forehead barely touching Daniel’s. When his captor’s eyes flashed that homicidal fire, Stavros dropped his tone, making sure to hold Daniel’s gaze as he said, “I beg for Annika, and I might even beg for your weak copy of her, but I don’t beg for you.”

Daniel’s gaze was all fire, setting Stavros’ skin to sweating. “Such denial.” He clicked his tongue.

“Es la verdad,” Stavros said. *It’s the truth.* “But you’re welcome to try, Daniel.”

Daniel tensed.

“Try and make me beg.” Stavros sank his teeth into his bottom lip, arousal a living thing in his lower belly, getting hotter by the second. “I welcome it.” He dropped his attentions to Daniel’s cruel mouth. “But you will have to do more than the last one to make me beg for you.” He wanted to push this man beyond any boundary he’d set. Ruffle him. Disable his control.

So Stavros touched his lips to Daniel’s chin.

Daniel’s sharp inhale was music to Stavros’ ears. Gasoline to his fire. A waving red flag in front of the bull.

“But you won’t, will you?” He flicked his tongue out, licked Daniel’s chin. Stavros’ own breath stuttered for a moment there as the other man’s taste swept along his taste buds. Salty skin. “You prefer to hide in the shadows and watch, with your hand on that pretty cock, whispering my name as you break. Because you do, don’t you?” He grinned. “My name breaks you. Every. Time.”

A strong hand wrapped around his neck so fast, Stavros saw stars. He choked, forcing out a chuckle as he met Daniel’s dark gaze. Anger, yes. The blood thirst, too.

But lust was also crowded in there, wild and uncontrollable.

Daniel Nieto wanted him.

“Did you watch?” Speaking was difficult with the vice grip at his throat, but he forced it out. “Did you watch her suck me and wish it were you? Wish you were brave enough to suck off the man who killed your precious Petra?”

Daniel’s head cocked, and a muscle throbbed in his jaw, but he didn’t speak. He simply watched Stavros while squeezing his throat.

“You want to.” Stavros coughed. Jesus, he was so hard. Cock tenting the sweats, dampening the front with pre-cum as he throbbed and dripped. This was beyond any foreplay he’d engaged in. The danger, intoxicating. “And I want you to.” He twisted his mouth into a smile. “Get on your knees for me. Let me put it on your face,” he whispered. “On your tongue. And I’ll beg for you. Todos los pinches días.”

A smile crept up Daniel’s features. Genuine. Brightening his eyes for a second. “Are you propositioning me, Mr. Konstantinou?”

“Stavros. Mr. Konstantinou is a lot to say, especially when you’ll already have your mouth full.” Stavros winked. “And I’ll tell you a secret. I taste even better than you’ve imagined.”

Daniel snorted. He didn’t move away, but his grip loosened.

Stavros didn’t have the use of his hand otherwise he’d grab onto him, prevent him from taking away his hold. He used his words instead. “I’m hard for you.” With Daniel’s grip not as tight as before, he could speak easier, but his voice got raspier as he spoke the truth. “For you, not for fake Annika. Not for the real one, either. For you.” He dropped his gaze to the other man’s groin, covered in dark slacks. “And you’re hard for me.”

Daniel’s hand dropped away and he stood. “Using your body to buy your way out. I expected more from you, Mr. Konstantinou.”

Except that had been nowhere on Stavros’ radar. He’d wanted Daniel’s hands on him. Wanted to watch his captor lose control the way he stole all of Stavros’ control. Fuck. “And I expected to ride your face,” he shot back. “We can’t all have our way, Daniel.”

Daniel fisted Stavros’ hair and yanked him upright, or as far as he could go with the chains restricting his movements. “That’s Nieto to you, Greek.”

Stavros smiled up at him. “Me gusto tú boca, Daniel.” *I like your mouth.*

Daniel stared down at him, nostrils flared. His eyes, though. He battled himself behind those dark bottomless eyes.

“Jefe.”

Henan’s voice had Daniel’s shoulders tensing slightly, before he released Stavros and walked away without looking back. Heads together, the two men conversed in rapid Spanish, too hushed for Stavros to understand. Then Henan unlocked the gate and Daniel exited.

Stavros watched him go, groin throbbing, biting his tongue to keep from calling him back. Then he realized Daniel hadn’t denied being hard for him.

Stavros grinned.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I *'m hard for you.*

Daniel slammed his fist into the man's stomach and he cried out, attempting to bend over to protect himself. Except he couldn't. He was strung up on the makeshift cross Toro had constructed. Arms and legs restrained.

And you're hard for me.

He struck the man again and again, knuckle dusters sending blood flying.

Me gusto tú boca.

Daniel went after the man's face, pounding away until he no longer felt his hands. He couldn't get away from that persistent voice in his head. Stavros Konstantinou's voice.

You're hard for me.

Aroused by Stavros Konstantinou.

He no longer saw the face of Chucho. He was punching Stavros, blooding him, pulverizing him in an effort to stop those words. It was one thing to lie out loud, but inside his head there was no escaping the truth anymore.

He was aroused by Stavros Konstantinou. By the way he spoke. The way he fought. The way he bled. The way he looked at Daniel.

Petra's killer.

That anticipation he'd experienced, the fire in his belly when he thought about Stavros. It had a name. Not anger. Not hatred.

Want.

His chest threatened to cave in on him, and his arms grew heavy, so he stopped and yanked off the knuckle dusters before flinging out a hand to Toro who stood silently at his back. Daniel hadn't come for this. Toro was beyond capable of doing the dirty work, but he'd needed it.

The spilling of blood was supposed to calm him, but it made him think about Stavros licking his blood off that knife.

The bat Toro handed over settled into his palm, and he gripped it then swung.

Chucho's head snapped back. He'd long stopped screaming and begging for his life. Now he simply made low, moaning sounds. His blood scented the air, strong and acrid when mixed with the piss that soaked the front of his shorts, the only article of clothing Toro allowed him to wear.

Daniel put every frustration into his swings. Hitting Chucho everywhere, head to toe. He was about to die, and Daniel saw it the second Chucho gave up. His body went limp. He was a mangled mess of red.

Done.

But Daniel couldn't stop.

He kept going, blood coating the bat and loosening his grip. He couldn't stop.

I'm hard for you.

Me gusto tú boca.

Petra's killer.

There was betrayal. Then there was this. Stavros took Petra from him. Stole her life, stole their life. Their memories.

Yet Daniel wanted to touch him. Wanted to do all the things Stavros had spoken of in order to hear him beg. He was losing control. Losing his mind. Losing Petra all over again.

"Tío." Toro grabbed his arm, stopping him from going after Chucho's face again. "We need them to recognize him."

Much like the one before him, Chucho's demise would send a message. And his body parts would be dispersed to the different members of The Ghost Gang's hierarchy. If they could identify the victim.

Right now Chucho was a pulverized mess.

Daniel wanted to keep going.

Beat him into a puddle. A surrogate for the one he wanted.

Wanted to hurt. Maim. Kill. His captive.

Stavros was in his head constantly now. Throaty voice goading Daniel into kneeling for him. He'd set out to break the Greek and instead the captive was turning out to be the captor.

"Boss?"

He jerked away from Toro's tight grip and dropped the bat. It hit the floor with a loud echo, and he lifted his gaze to find his nephew watching him warily.

The infamous Daniel Nieto was falling apart. Was that what Toro saw? Because it was the way Daniel felt. Like his world was crumbling again. Going up in smoke again.

"You are coming undone, my friend."

Syren had seen this coming, why hadn't Daniel?

The Greek had been the architect of that the last time.

He was back to finish the job, helped along by Daniel himself.

He turned back to Toro. "Do it."

His nephew nodded then got the buzz saw. Together, they went to work dismembering the body.

Legs, from the hip down, with the tattoos declaring him part of Felipe's organization. Hands, cut from the shoulders with even more tattoos. The gold rings on the fingers of his right hand.

Torso, with the healed knife and bullet wounds.

And finally, Chucho's head, eyes still open.

Daniel took pleasure in this, dealing with his enemies. It was a love he got from his father. The Nieto patriarch had settled his scores in much the same manner, and he'd taken along his sons so they could witness it firsthand. Antonio could handle it just fine, but his passion had been with the numbers side of things.

Daniel was the one who got aroused by the sight of blood and anguished screams. His father saw it and exploited it. Before he took over for the old man, he'd been the one settling the scores. Killing for the organization. Spilling the blood. Soaking up the screams.

He got a high from it, and he refused to feel bad. His wife, she understood him. She kept that beast on a short leash, releasing him only when she felt it absolutely necessary. And afterward, she'd make love to him. Let him touch her with his bloodied hands, leaving red fingerprints all over her body.

"Done."

He swallowed and dragged a hand over his face, wiping away any traces of the turmoil inside him as he faced Toro again. “Handle it,” he said. “You know what’s next.”

“Sí, jefe.”

Looking at the concern on his nephew’s face eased some of the stress inside him. “What is it?” he asked. “What is on your mind?”

Toro shrugged, gaze searching. “Something is wrong.”

Perceptive. Much like his father. “What makes you say that?”

Hands shoved into his pockets, Toro remained silent for a while. He was as tall as Daniel, as tall as his father. The Nietos were tall men. Along with his brown eyes, every feature of his face was Nieto, from the sharp jaw to the nose and stubborn chin.

“I don’t know,” Toro finally answered. “You seem…angry.”

If it were anyone else questioning him, Nieto would have handled it differently. But this was Toro. This was family. He trusted his nephew’s judgment. “I am angry.” He chose to go with the truth. “But not at you.”

Toro nodded with his lips pressed into a hard line. “What is it?” His gaze narrowed. “Problems with the Greek?”

Toro had been there to help Daniel drug Stavros and get him from Lisbon to the States. He’d also been the one to offer up Wilhelmina’s pricey and very specific services, but Daniel made sure to keep him out of the loop on everything else having to do with his captive. He didn’t want any of it falling back on Toro’s shoulders.

“Nothing for you to concern yourself with.” He threw an arm around Toro’s shoulders. “How is your mother?”

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CHAPTER NINE

The sound of the cage opening made Stavros stir. The slightest of movements, but it took everything. Felt as if simply blinking took everything.

Drawing breath definitely wrung him ragged.

He'd given up on trying to predict when Daniel Nieto would show his face again. Time came and went at a snail's pace. He could predict nothing.

Other than Henan would fuck with him.

That he could count on.

Footsteps drew closer to where he lay, curled in a semi-fetal position on the thin piece of material posing as a mattress, but Stavros kept his eyes closed and waited. He expected Henan to come at him the way he'd been doing since the last time Daniel walked out the cage.

"If it were up to me, you'd already be dead."

Stavros opened his eyes at those word, spoken low, but clear enough that there'd be no mistaking them. The sentiment behind them wasn't surprising, not at all.

His guard leaned against the cage, a plate in his hand piled high with food. It smelled greasy and hot. Stavros swore he saw the steam rising. He drooled. Food was such a scarce commodity.

"If I had my way, I'd dismember you while you're still alive." Henan dipped his finger in the food then stuck it into his mouth, watching Stavros watch him. "Just to hear your screams."

"I'm, uh—" Stavros cleared his throat. "I'm not really the screaming type, lo siento." The last thing he should be doing in his weakened state was

antagonizing Henan, the man who held his sustenance in his hands. Literally. But Stavros couldn't help it.

Henan pushed away from the cage, face twisted into a scowl. "You would scream." He slammed a booted foot down on Stavros' ankle. "I would make you."

Despite the pain, Stavros didn't look away. "You would try." He forced a smile. "And you'd get an A for effort." Henan was definitely not on the short list of things Stavros feared.

Daniel Nieto on the other hand…

Henan smashed the plate of food into Stavros' face with such force, he fell back onto the mattress.

Ah shit.

He would never get used to Henan's kicks. All over his body, most to his torso. He threw his hands up, swiping at the food on his face and in his eyes while trying to block those kicks.

"Una inocente," Henan raved with each kick. "Ella era una inocente." *She was an innocent.* "You killed an innocent."

He wasn't telling Stavros something he didn't already know. The Nietos had been a job. A fucking job that changed his life. But he was a business man. It was what he did.

"She didn't deserve it." Henan sounded more like a grieving spouse than the actual grieving spouse. "Beautiful." His kicks faltered, as did his tone. "She was beautiful and good." He stumbled backward, and Stavros lifted his head.

Henan had staggered a couple feet away, and was watching him with a dark expression, a mix of heartbreak, bloodlust, and actual loss.

Well. Stavros wiped at whatever was sliding down his cheek—blood or grease from the food, he didn't know—and smirked. "The lovely Petra. You were in love with her." Did Daniel Nieto know? "How would your boss react, I wonder?" He licked at his finger without bothering to see what was on it as he winked. "Should we tell him and find out?"

The menace in Henan's gaze shifted as his body did, moving closer to Stavros. "I changed my mind." His hand dropped, went behind his back.

"Oh?" Stavros lifted a brow.

"You don't need to scream,'" Henan said. He pointed a gun at Stavros. A Glock, if he wasn't mistaken. "You just need to die."

Well, fuck.

The second bullet hurt more than the first, and that was saying something, because that first shot felt as though someone had punched him in the chest with a steel fist wrapped in fire. By the time the second bullet blasted into his left shoulder, Stavros was face up on the floor, sprawled out.

Staring at the ceiling.

Death, and he didn't even get to taste Daniel Nieto.

That shit sucked.

Awareness faded slowly. He had enough time to lie on that cold floor, immobile and shivering, staring at nothing, and appreciate the unfairness of it.

He got killed by the help?

If he wasn't frozen in the pain of his impending death, he might laugh. As it was, he couldn't move. Even his eyes refused to blink. Yet he faded. As he sank into the waiting shadows pulling at him, Henan crouched over him, almost sitting on Stavros' midsection.

Dick in hand.

Peeing on him.

He swore he heard Daniel Nieto's calm, unflappable voice.

He swore he saw Daniel's face.

Which meant that even in death, Stavros couldn't help but have Daniel kneel for him. He would've smiled at that.

Except, he was dead.

"Oh fuck!" Pain was all Stavros knew. His brain was foggy with it. Everything hurt, inside and out. He didn't know where, how or on what to focus. His eyelids trembled when he tried lifting them, and the bright lights all around him burned them until they watered.

Fuck. Again.

So he wasn't dead? Was that disappointment in his gut, or simply more pain from Henan's bullet? He tried sitting up, and a hand settled on the back of his neck.

"Easy. Easy."

Daniel.

Stavros had to rethink the not being dead part, because Daniel Nieto was what? Taking care of him? He stared, blinking furiously to make his

jittery vision focus as his captor knelt next to him, and tipped Stavros' face up.

"Are you all right?"

Felt as if he'd died and woken up in an alternate universe. "I'm fine." He was beyond hoarse. Throat on fire.

Daniel's lips twitched the tiniest bit. "Are you?"

He'd have shrugged, except his shoulder was having none of it. "You're on your knees before me, and you know how I feel about that, so yes." His voice wasn't up to its usual snark, but he made it work. "I'm fine."

Daniel's gaze stayed on him for a few heartbeats, where Stavros held his breath and tried not to let his confusion show. He was safe when Daniel wanted to kill him, when they were playing that fucked up game of torture as foreplay. This?

This was out of his wheelhouse.

"So Henan shot me, huh?" he asked, because he didn't know how to deal with this. No bloodshed. No anger. No threat of death. Just Daniel Nieto with a calm hand on the back of Stavros' neck, holding him upright.

Keeping him steady.

"Sí."

If he hadn't been busy getting lost in the murky dark of Daniel's eyes, Stavros would have missed the flash of anger that burned bright for a quick second then disappeared.

"I'd have thought that would make you happy," he muttered.

Daniel's nostrils flared.

"You should give him a raise or something." He should shut his mouth, but he didn't know when to quit where Daniel was concerned. When the other man didn't respond to that, Stavros asked, "Did you know Henan was in love with your wife?"

Daniel dropped his hand from Stavros' neck. "Sí." He got to his feet and stared down at Stavros in silence, hands fisted at his sides, expression as smooth as glass.

Jesus. "Where am I?" Stavros looked around for the first time. He was on a bed. An actual bed, in what looked like a bedroom. At least the beginnings of one. The place was empty save for the bed, the pale blue walls spotless. There was one window to the far left corner of the room, but it had no curtains and he made out the thick bars covering it.

Daniel didn’t answer his query. Instead he held up his hand then opened it palm up. Two white pills. “For the pain.”

Stavros snorted. For the pain, huh? “Why aren’t I dead?” He tried to rise again, but his body wasn’t having it. “Ung.” He fell backward onto the pillows, and Daniel was right there.

Helping him. What kind of sick alternate reality was this?

“You need to take it easy,” Daniel murmured as he slid a finger over the bloodied bandage covering the wound to Stavros’ upper left shoulder. “Take the pain medication and rest.”

“No.” Stavros grabbed his wrist when Daniel made to pull away. The other man flinched under his touch, but he didn’t resist much. “Why am I alive? What is this?” He looked around quickly before meeting Daniel’s expressionless eyes. “Another sick way to try and break me? Because it won’t work, I can promise you that.” Never mind that his body felt very much like that of a broken doll at the moment.

“Your death is mine,” Daniel said simply. He pulled his hand from Stavros’ grip slowly, until only their fingertips touched. Until they were connected by just that, the barest brush of fingertips. “I decide when and how.”

“Yet you put a fox to guard the hen house.” Stavros cocked his head. “Or was he acting on your orders?”

“Don’t try to figure me out, Mr. Konstantinou.” Daniel broke their flimsy connection, placing the two pills next to Stavros on the mattress. Then he picked up a bottle of water from the floor, and positioned it next to the painkillers. “Take the medication, I need you back in fighting form.”

Stavros licked his chapped lips at Daniel’s retreating back. “You should know by now, I’m always in fighting form, Daniel.”

Daniel’s disbelieving snort lingered long after the door closed behind him. Stavros stared up at the ceiling as he lay on his back. No way was he taking any medication that could dull his senses more than they’d already been dulled.

Daniel Nieto was taking care of him. Dressing his wounds. Giving him medication. What was his captor’s angle?

He stayed like that, doing what Daniel warned him not to do. Trying to figure the man out. Until he fell asleep.

A sleep filled with breath-stealing pain and chills that warped his mind until he didn’t know who he was or the identity of the man talking softly to

him. Touching him gently, forcing liquid down his throat. He alternated between flashing hot and trembling cold, curled up on the soft mattress that still seemed to find every bruise on his body and press just so on it.

Pain surrounded him, and Stavros simply floated on it. Trying desperately to grasp on to anything that appeared solid to him. Like the raspy drone of the man wiping his brow. He knew that man, knew even in his lost, fevered state to be wary of him. But he represented something Stavros desperately wanted.

Something he wasn't brave enough to take.

Yet.

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CHAPTER TEN

"Now we wait."

Daniel didn't look up from Stavros' pale face as Boyd spoke. He'd been sure the Greek would not survive the infection. But so far he had. He'd fought, and Daniel had found himself right there helping his captive fight.

He no longer knew what he stood for. Nothing made sense anymore. When he'd had Boyd brought in, the man had been shocked to see Stavros still in Daniel's possession. Still shackled. Boyd knew better than to say anything, but from his expression Daniel understood Boyd's confusion.

He shared that confusion now.

Why wasn't Stavros dead yet? Why had he nursed the bullet wounds Henan had been brave enough to deliver?

Stavros moaned in his sleep, head thrashing back and forth on the pillows, fingers reflexively grasping at the thin sheet Boyd had thrown over his naked body after he'd stripped him of his sweat-soaked clothes earlier. Boyd had injected him with something to get him to rest, and also given him medicine for the infection.

Daniel had been the one to wipe Stavros' brow with a cool cloth. He'd been the one to force the man's mouth open and pour thin broth down his throat.

Why?

Just days prior he'd been looking forward to the Greek's death. He'd been making plans for it. Salivating at the thought of it. And now?

He stared down at his right hand, held it up and fisted it. He'd touched Stavros. Not out of anger. Not out of revenge. To help him. To heal him. He hadn't known he'd had it in him. But he'd stood next to the bed and stared down at Stavros crying out in his feverish state, calling for Annika. Calling for his father.

He'd wanted Stavros broken. This was the most vulnerable he'd ever get. And instead of wrapping his hands around Stavros' throat and squeezing the life out of him, Daniel had instead held water to his lips and encouraged the man who killed his wife to drink.

He'd encouraged him to fight.

He squeezed his fist tighter.

What was happening?

He was pulled to Stavros, making Daniel the helpless one. Watching himself edge closer and closer to the brink of that cliff. Betrayal and guilt awaited him at the bottom, yet sometimes that fall didn't seem so bad.

That scared him. Fear resided in the heart that had somehow become lodged in his throat. He was afraid of Stavros. Afraid of himself, of what he might do the next time they got close enough for Daniel to feel Stavros' body heat. Close enough for him to put hands on Stavros.

It wouldn't all be in anger.

It wouldn't all be in rage.

"Keep feeding him the soup," Boyd instructed. "Lots of fluids, and keep an eye on the wounds." He paused. "Sir."

Daniel didn't answer and Boyd eventually exited the room. When the door clicked closed behind him, Daniel went to his knees right there.

"Petra." He tilted his face upward, eyes closed. "Perdóname." His throat worked. "Perdóname, por favor." *Forgive me, please.*

It was foreign to him, everything he'd done since he'd walked into the bunker to find Henan standing over a bleeding Stavros, a gun in his hand. He should have thanked Henan for doing what Daniel somehow could not. He should have finished the job Henan started for him, and ended Stavros' life.

A life for a life.

Blood for blood.

Stavros for Petra's.

How could he justify not delivering on the promise he'd made to his wife the night he put her in the ground? How could he justify the panic he'd

experienced as Stavros bled out on that cold floor? Was there a way to explain what he felt at the sight of Stavros so pale and delirious, frail and vulnerable on that bed?

His chest squeezed, seemingly instantly too small to contain his heart as it pounded furiously.

He felt for Stavros Konstantinou, and it wasn't all about revenge and retribution.

"Perdóname," he begged his dead wife. Because he'd never be able to forgive himself. What he'd done. The way he'd betrayed Petra and their love, there was no excuse. He touched the rosary beads wrapped around his wrist, caressing it as he took a deep breath and got to his feet.

Things couldn't remain as they were. He glanced at a sleeping Stavros. He was still now, face lax. Daniel didn't allow himself to linger. He couldn't afford to. Instead he left the room and went in search of Henan.

He found Henan down in the bunker, smoking a cigarette while staring at his phone. At the sight of Daniel he jumped to his feet.

"Jefe."

"Explicaté." *Explain yourself.*

Henan's jaw ticked. "He killed Petra," he said in rapid Spanish. "And you're keeping him here, why? You're feeding him. Keeping him alive? He should be dead."

Daniel backhanded him hard enough that Henan staggered a couple steps backward. "Two things." He kept his tone even and his expression calm as he held up two fingers. "You don't question me. Ever. And you follow my orders." He grabbed Henan by the chin, forcing him to look him in the eye when the other man would have glanced away. "Every single time."

The other man weighed more than him. Was taller than him. To some that might mean Henan would be the one with the advantage. Henan had always been a follower, better at taking orders than giving them. Never one to take the initiative, which was how Daniel ended up with Petra even though Henan knew and loved her longer.

"He killed her," Henan spat. "He took her from us, and you're protecting him?"

So Henan had a sudden death wish. With the one hand on his chin, Daniel slammed the heel of his other hand into Henan's windpipe, pushing him back against the cage when he doubled over. "You haven't lost

anything, because you never had her. She was my wife. Mine," he said softly. "I lost her, and the people who took her from me will pay. You don't have to tell me what Stavros did. I was there. I wear the scars." He banged Henan's head into the cage one final time before dropping his hands and stepping back.

The other man coughed and sagged against the cage. "Jefe."

"Not your boss, am I?" Daniel removed his trusty blade from his pocket.

Henan's eyes went wide, and he held up both hands. "Jefe, por favor."

"You don't really expect to question me, disobey me, and live, do you?" He stabbed Henan in the chest, in the heart. Once. "Pendejo." He twisted the knife.

The other man froze, mouth dropping open as he grabbed at Daniel's lapels. Daniel pushed him off, pulling out the blade slowly, as Henan made a high, painful sound. He stepped back, and Henan crumbled to the floor.

She rested stiffly in his arms, staring off into nothing. The cocktail of drugs she took on a daily basis seemed to keep her even more confused. Way past the time she should be asleep, but she remained awake, legs twitching against the bed, fingers plucking at the sheets in obvious agitation.

"I am here," he muttered against her forehead in Spanish. "I am here."

But she didn't know him. Didn't know where *here* was.

At the sound of his voice, she tilted her head back, staring up at his face, wide eyes searching, lips trembling.

"Todo está bien." *Everything is okay.* Her illness turned him into a liar overnight as he issued weak assurances and promised things he'd never be able to deliver. But those words, no matter how empty, kept her calm.

The clock over in the corner chimed gently. 1 a.m. She pulled away from him then, as though that sound was her cue, struggling to escape his arms.

"No. Stay here. Stay with me."

Her gaze locked on the bedroom door and didn't budge. Like every other night, she gave in to that compulsion, getting off the bed when he eased his hold on her. He sat up, taking it all in as she bent, sliding on

shoes. The left, a white furry bedroom slipper. The right, a black leather sandal.

When she grabbed her coat, he stood, following her out the door. Down the stairs which she navigated slowly, holding on to the banister, and finally into the kitchen. He was the one to flip on the lights and when she made her way to the stove, he grabbed her.

“I cannot let you do that.” He held her against his chest, his chin pressed to the top of her head. Her frailty hit him low, a punch to the gut that knocked the breath out of him.

All his weakness surrounded him tonight, pulling him down. All that emotion, he suffocated in it slowly, holding on even as she slid through his fingers like grains of sand. Soon she’d be all gone.

Soon there would be nothing left.

Not that he had anything substantial to hold on to at the moment.

In his arms, she didn’t move, standing so still. But she spoke into his chest, muffled words of weak, halting Spanish, warning children of danger. He guided her into the living room and onto the couch, helping her to lie down. Pulling a large blanket over her. Bright and multi-colored, it was one she’d made herself.

Pre-illness.

Something more than duty kept him sitting on the floor next to the couch, watching her watch him in silence. He sought comfort even as he gave it. He hungered for familiarity when he knew she’d never provide it. And he struggled to understand something no one quite understood.

How could she be there with him, but gone all the same?

How could she be a stranger while wearing the face of a woman he’d loved all his life?

Even after she’d fallen softly asleep sometime before dawn, he remained at her side.

Waiting for the answers.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

He stayed away from his patient slash captive for almost a week, letting Boyd see to Stavros' care. Pretending he didn't care.

Pretending he didn't feel.

Until Boyd approached him with hesitant steps. "Discúlpeme, señor. He's awake."

"How is he?" The fever had broken a while ago, the bullet wounds healing nicely, he knew. Boyd had insisted Stavros needed sustenance beyond the occasional bread and water if Daniel wanted him to get—and stay—well.

He allowed it, but Stavros remained shackled to the bed Daniel used to sleep in.

"He is stronger, señor." Boyd glanced away then back quickly. "He is insisting that he see you."

Of course he was. "He has been fed?"

Boyd nodded. "And bathed."

Daniel could only imagine Stavros' reaction to having Boyd give him his sponge bath. "You may go."

Boyd's eyes widened. "Señor, I—"

He didn't look back to make sure Boyd followed his order as he strode to the bedroom Stavros occupied and stepped inside.

He shut the door quietly behind him, and stood there, taking in the man on the bed. He had some color to his skin again, aside from the blue and black bruises from his rough treatment under Daniel's hands.

Rough treatment.

He deserved so much more than just that rough treatment.

His hair had grown a bit, Daniel realized, falling down to the middle of his forehead. Boyd had dressed him in a white t-shirt and black sweats. Stavros' dominant hand, the left, was shackled to the metal bed frame, as was his left ankle.

His eyes had been closed, but at the sound of the door closing they flew open.

They watched each other, and in the depths of Stavros' eyes Daniel saw relief and more. But those other things, he refused to acknowledge them. Instead he walked closer, never breaking eye contact, until he stood next to the bed, staring down at Stavros.

"So it's true," Stavros murmured. "You're keeping me alive." His voice was still a bit weak and hoarse, but the sound of him…

Daniel's pulse galloped in his ears and he couldn't deny that. "Mr. Konstantinou, I hear you're better." He took an obscene amount of pride in the steadiness of his tone.

"Depends on who you ask." Stavros' mouth curved into his trademark smirk. "I'm alive, but I could be better." He rattled on the cuffs around his hand for effect.

"You wanted to see me." He didn't bother phrasing it as a question.

"I did, and I have to say, you do look good." Stavros licked his lips. "I was sure my fever had fucked with my brain…" He eyed Daniel up and down. "But no."

Dangerous heat swirled in Daniel's lower belly. He gritted his teeth. "What do you want?"

All mirth disappeared from Stavros' eyes, and his expression turned serious. His gaze was heavy, locking onto Daniel's and keeping him rooted to the floor. "Do you really want to know what I want?" Stavros asked softly. "Are you sure that's a question you want answered?"

So many things he'd seen and done, but Daniel found at that moment that he wasn't strong enough, brave enough, to follow that question where it would inevitably lead. That weakness, that vulnerability angered him.

"Do you mistake me for one of the fools you play with?" he rasped.

Stavros observed him, his eyes saying things his mouth didn't. The silence, thick and charged, made a mockery of Daniel's words.

"This is your bed, isn't it?" Stavros' unfettered leg slid up and down the mattress. "I can smell you on the sheets. On the pillows." His chest rose and

fell when he took a deep breath. “You slept here.” He closed his eyes, making a low hum in the back of his throat.

Daniel watched with his mouth dry and his hands fisted. Otherwise he’d touch him. He’d press a thumb to the pulse at the base of Stavros’ throat. He’d brush his knuckles across his scarred cheek. He’d slide his fingers through the hair brushing Stavros’ forehead.

He’d touch him.

“Daniel.”

His body jerked, and his gaze flew from Stavros’ mouth back to his eyes. “Never call me that,” he lashed out.

Every time. Every single time he got in the Greek’s vicinity he lost his resolve. Lost his focus. No matter how hard he tried, emotion ruled him. Anger and regret along with the new ones, want and betrayal.

“Why am I still here?” Stavros was the calm one, gaze steady, voice smooth. “Why am I still alive?”

Daniel turned away, giving Stavros his back as he headed for the door. He had to get out of there. His chest felt as if it were caving in on him. The pressure inside him built, getting too big, too much. He had to get out.

Turned coward so quickly, but yes, he wanted to turn tail and run. He saw it coming, that fall. Saw himself walk into the inferno with arms flung wide, heat from the flames stripping him to bone.

“Don’t you walk away. Answer me!” Stavros yelled. “Fucking answer me. Give me that.”

“Give you?” Daniel swung around and went right back to him. “Give you?” He pulled the gun from his waist. Trembling. He shook something dreadful. Emotion crashing down on him in one swoop. “I should give you? After everything you took from me, I should give you?”

“Yes.” So bold. Defiant. The way he demanded. The way he owned that selfishness. It shouldn’t make Daniel’s pulse stutter.

He’d been dead for years, and this man brought him back to life. His voice. His blood. His eyes. They brought Daniel back to life.

It was wrong.

This want. It was wrong. But wrong felt so right, the way it writhed thick and warm along his spine. Like hot, spiced honey.

He put the gun to Stavros’ forehead. Pressed it against him. “You’re alive because you’re mine. Your blood. Your life. Your death. Mine.”

Daniel pounded his chest with one hand, the other holding the gun pointed at Stavros. Right between the eyes. “Yo decido, cabrón.” *I decide.*

The other man just watched him, with wide eyes. Accepting.

“I should give you what you gave me.” The words were lava-hot on his tongue. “Sorrow like I’ve never felt. Pain I didn’t think I’d ever escape.” With the way he shook, the gun skidded across Stavros’ forehead, landing at his left temple. “You took her. In the blink of an eye, you took her from me.”

“I know.”

He knew. Of course, he knew what he’d done. The damage he’d caused. The hell he’d unleashed. He knew. “What should I give you then?” Daniel asked in a whisper. “What do I have that you haven’t already taken, Stavros Konstantinou? I have exactly one bullet in this gun. Is that what you want?”

Stavros stared up at him, teeth in his bottom lip, nostrils flared. The pulse at his throat beat wildly.

Daniel pulled the trigger.

Click.

Stavros didn’t flinch.

“What do you want? Contéstame!” he roared. *Answer me.* A hairsbreadth from shattering. He heard the sharp cracks. Heard his control collapse to the floor at his feet. His grip on the gun was tenuous at best, same as his grip on his sanity. He stared down at the man on that bed.

Destrozado.

Torn apart.

“Your touch.” Stavros’ voice, it trembled too. “I crave it.”

Those words shredded whatever was left inside Daniel. Rocking him back on his heels. Unsteady. “Do you?” He didn’t blink as he squeezed the trigger again.

Stavros’ lips parted. Lust shadowed his eyes, turned them a dangerous dark. He was fascinante—*fascinating*—with the splash of red on his cheeks and chest. His free hand gripped at the sheet, fisting it and tugging, as his chest rose and fell rapidly.

Daniel’s body throbbed, liking that sight. The monster inside him came alive and clamored for more. “I want to hurt you,” he snarled, bringing his face down to Stavros’ so they could be nose to nose. “I want to touch you.” He caressed Stavros’ cheek with the length of the gun, holding his head steady with his free hand.

Stavros' breath sawed out onto Daniel's lips. He smelled like lemon and ginger, the tea Boyd had been feeding him. He also smelled hot, felt like it, too. Always warming Daniel.

Thawing him.

He climbed the bed, body almost smothering Stavros as he went in search of that heat.

"I want to kiss you, and I want to kill you." Mindless. Directionless—or was he? Because his every focus was on Stavros' face. His destination.

A sound left Stavros. A moan. His unshackled hand, the right, slid up Daniel's shoulder and grasped him by the nape as they stared at each other.

They panted together. Stavros looked like Daniel felt.

Feverish.

"And I want to bleed you."

"Do it. Any one of it," Stavros whispered against Daniel's chin. "All of it."

Daniel brought the weapon forward, brushing Stavros' lips with the tip. He wanted the other man to stop talking. To silence the words battering his defenses. But Stavros simply parted his lips and licked the gun.

Daniel's breath hitched.

The heat on slow simmer in his belly turned all the way up to boil, and he pushed the gun deeper into Stavros' mouth. The Greek's lashes fluttered. Lips stretched around the tip of the gun, he groaned and didn't stop sucking it.

Licking.

Fellating.

Oh Dios.

Restraint went out the window.

The monster in you recognizes the monster in me.

Perdóname.

He pulled the gun out, and a string of Stavros' saliva clung to the muzzle of the Glock. Daniel stared at it. He couldn't stop shaking. The bitter taste of betrayal remained at the back of his tongue. Never far away.

Still…

He traced Stavros' lips with the gun. Slower, a more detailed caress.

Caress. It didn't make sense, what he was doing. The man he was, the man he used to be was no longer present. He didn't recognize himself. But he couldn't stop stroking Stavros' lips.

Everything felt foreign. Every sensation new as Stavros rocked his lower body against him. Daniel operated only on instinct, on selfishness, wanting to punish Stavros. Wanting to prove that he was more than this person he'd become, obsessed and filled with lust and a dark, intoxicating drive to touch the man who'd stolen everything from him.

Just plain old wanting.

It bowed his head, that intense, intangible thing. Moved him closer still, until his lips were right *there*, hovering over Stavros'. He got rid of the gun, making sure to put the safety on before he tossed it to the far side of the mattress. Then, with trembling fingers, Daniel traced Stavros' scruffy jawline, the hairs there more silver than black.

"What have you done?" he asked out loud. Broken words directed inward, at him. And to Stavros, as well. They conveyed everything. His fear. His need. The confusion. "What have you done?"

"This is us." Stavros' breath alone undid him, the way it caressed Daniel's chin. Hot, but not enough. Hinting at an inferno. Teasing, making him ache for more. "What we do to each other. What we feel."

What they felt. None of it made sense. None of it was right.

But why was Daniel here, plastered to the brick-hard body of his enemy, knee-deep in so much deep needing? Yearning for things like taste and touch?

He took Petra.

It made no sense that Daniel would want this, that he'd betray the woman he loved for this. It made no sense that he'd need this, the scent and feel of Stavros. Denial sat at the tip of his tongue.

Heavy.

"Daniel."

Their noses bumped first. Then their lips brushed.

Tremors rushed through him at that faint contact. Stavros' breath hitched, and Daniel froze.

Perdóname.

The sense of betrayal hit him low in the gut, all twisted up with every other sensation. Felt almost as if Petra was there next to them, witnessing that shattering of the man Daniel used to be.

Yet he couldn't stop. The tide dragged him along by the ankles, and he went without a fight. The awkward brushing of lips still managed to unman him. Uncharted waters left him floundering, so that all he had left to grasp

on to for anchor was the feel of Stavros under him, lips firm, parting slightly as Stavros grabbed him by the nape, holding Daniel's head steady.

Taking control of the kiss.

Turning it from soft and tentative brushes, to open-mouthed, wet and panting in a second.

Daniel moaned, the lust and hunger in full effect. Their tongues crashed together, Stavros' taste mingling effortlessly with the betrayal already coating Daniel's tongue.

Stavros arched under him, serving himself up. And Daniel took, wrestling with him for control. Drinking him up, taking him inside. Swallowing. Funny how Stavros' furiously wet kiss quenched Daniel's thirst, yet somehow left him parched.

Despite the guilt, he deepened the kiss, mouth opening wider than ever. An effort to gorge on everything that set him on fire, but still in the most unexpected ways cooled him down. The ball of lust in his belly blazed for Stavros like the midday sun, and he groaned when Stavros rocked against him.

Their erections were pressed together, Stavros' thighs parted, cradling Daniel between his legs. The hand at Daniel's nape drifted down, along the indent of his spine. Over his clothes, still he flinched at the burn.

Their positions had changed sometime when he hadn't been paying attention, and now instead of being the captive, Stavros had captured him. Effortlessly. No warning.

Daniel used to be the man in charge, now he drowned, walking willingly into the unknown waters. Embracing it, latching on to Stavros' tongue and sucking until the other man squirmed underneath him.

He canted his hips, pressed hard, chasing the pleasure that hurt so sweetly.

Stavros' grip on him loosened, body shaking. His shadowed jawline scratched at Daniel, the sensation bringing shivers. Never had he been bombarded with so many emotions and sensation from just a kiss.

Just a meeting of lips.

With Petra—

He froze.

Petra.

Reality yanked his lust-fogged brain back to the surface, and he threw himself off Stavros. Landing on his knees on the floor.

“Daniel?”

Petra.

She deserved better than this. She deserved a husband capable of avenging her. She deserved the devotion in death that she never quite got in life.

She deserved more

He kept his eyes closed, fingers pulling at the rosary beads wrapped around his wrist. The mattress shifted, and a hand settled on his shoulder.

“Daniel, what—”

“Do not.” Breath sawed through his lungs, his chest rising and falling as the ravaged words left him. “Do not.” She’d trusted him to protect her. He’d promised to protect her. That failure would follow him to his grave. He’d promised to make them all pay.

Here was Stavros Konstantinou, turning Daniel into a liar twice over.

Any other man. He could want any other man.

Not this one.

“Petra.” With his back against the bed, he stared down at the old rosary beads, plucking them. “Petra, lo siento.” Lips still wet from the drugging intoxication of Stavros’ kiss, belly tight, body still throbbing in anticipation of release, he sat, whispering to ghosts. “Lo siento.”

“Fuck.” Above him, Stavros muttered a panicked curse. “Fuck.”

Daniel got to his feet, refusing to look into Stavros’ eyes as he grabbed his free hand and shackled it to the other one. He ached, didn’t think his knees would hold him up. He needed to sit down. Needed to clear his head. Think about what he’d just done, but his body was buzzing. Blood rushing in his ears.

He lingered. On his tongue, in his nostrils, Stavros lingered. The tips of Daniel’s fingers, the sensation of touching. Stroking. It all stayed with Daniel. A permanence he couldn’t deny.

He tried. He tried. For Petra, he tried.

“You’re walking away?” Despite the incredulity in Stavros’ voice, Daniel made out the slight tremor, and the lust he hadn’t yet shaken.

It wasn’t as if Daniel had shaken his. He might never get rid of it.

“Daniel. Daniel, look at me.” The cuffs clanged when Stavros tugged on them. “Look at me, por favor.”

Daniel did look at him, at the need for more written all over his face, and in the lines of his body. His fingers twitched and he fisted his hands to

keep from smoothing a finger across Stavros' lips. "That is all I had do to get you to beg, yes?"

Stavros' eyes hardened and his mouth tightened a fraction. "Undo the handcuffs. Or finish what you started."

Daniel scoffed, and turned toward the door.

"You're afraid. Because I'm a man."

"No." Rage exploded like a pin-pricked balloon. He spun around, but didn't make a move toward the bed otherwise he might listen to his body and climb right back on. "That is the easy part. You took her, and I can't touch you without thinking of that night, without thinking of her." His voice broke, and Daniel shook his head. He had to get out of there. The further he got from Stavros right then, the better it would be for his sanity. "It can't be you. It can't be you."

Stavros stared up at him, swallowing, drawing Daniel's attention to his throat. The skin was red, rubbed raw by the chains and Daniel's hand, but he wouldn't scar. Not the way he'd scarred Daniel. "Of course." Stavros nodded once. He glanced away and when he brought his gaze back to Daniel, his eyes glistened. "The last time I wished for anything, I was probably ten years old. But right now, I wish I'd said no when I was offered the job." His throat worked. "And I wish I knew how it felt to be loved by someone the way you love her."

"No." Daniel held up a hand. "No." Especially not after what they'd just done. He went to the door.

"Don't go," Stavros called out. "Please. Please, don't go."

"I can't stay." Daniel grabbed the doorknob. "If I stay…"

Stavros didn't speak again, because he heard what Daniel didn't say. If he stayed, they'd finish what he started. Then his betrayal would be complete.

So he left. Even though his body kept humming, waiting for what he promised to deliver. Even though he wanted to turn around and go back into that room, and climb back onto that bed.

He left.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"Is he still alive?" Syren greeted Daniel at the door to his condo with an eyebrow raised.

Daniel ignored the question, striding quickly past Syren. He stopped short when he spotted Syren's husband lying in the middle of the room on a pile of blankets, toddler son clasped to his chest, teenaged daughter curled against him. The kids snored louder than their father.

Syren closed the door and stepped over his sleeping family, motioning Daniel to follow him into the other room. In the spacious office, Daniel remained standing against the door while Syren took a seat.

"You don't look good." Syren eyed him up and down. "Your prisoner being difficult?"

"What scares you?" Daniel asked.

He always felt uncomfortable when Syren Rua smiled. Maybe because he shouldn't be that beautiful, or maybe because Daniel couldn't help being a little mesmerized by that beauty.

"Interesting question. Should I be worried?"

"Men like us, we've seen and done the worst." Daniel crossed his arms. "So what would scare a man like you? Or a man like me?"

The mellowness in Syren's eyes melted away. Picking up a silver letter opener, he stroked it with one finger, gaze dropping to follow the movement as he spoke. "Everything I do, the people I deal with, and the strings I pull, it's all for my family." He dropped the letter opener onto the desk and lifted his gaze to Daniel. "The safety and happiness of who's on the other side of that door…" He pointed past Daniel. "That keeps me up at night."

Syren was a dangerous man. The burier of bodies and the keeper of dead men's secrets. A title like that would keep a man up at night.

As for Daniel? "Stavros Konstantinou keeps me up at night."

Syren sat back in his chair. Heavily.

"At first it was about revenge."

"And now?" Syren uncapped the crystal decanter on his desk and poured liquid amber into a single glass. "What is it now?"

What was it? "Now, it is no longer just about revenge." It was the best he could do.

"Drink up, amigo." Syren pushed the glass of cognac in his direction.

Daniel retrieved the drink, and he downed it in one toss. "You're not surprised."

Syren's lips quirked. "I am not surprised." His eyes were full of knowing. "When do you release him?"

"I don't." He placed the empty glass back on Syren's desk. "That part remains unchanged."

From the slight narrowing of his eyes, Syren didn't approve. Then again, he hadn't approved of the original plan, either. Maybe he'd been onto something.

"Really."

"My…lapse in judgment was an aberration." One he still felt clear to his toes. "Nothing has changed."

Syren laughed, loud and long, in his face. "Never took you for the delusional type, but hey…" He shrugged. "Good for you."

Daniel frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're gonna learn today."

Three days since it happened. They fed him twice a day, and so far he hadn't seen Daniel for six meals. So three days since he'd officially lost his mind. This thing, this game, it could end no other way but badly.

He'd begged. Begged.

This want inside him, growing bigger and hotter with each day he spent as Daniel Nieto's captive, it could never be satisfied. He understood that now. Even if Daniel walked into that room, and fucked him until kingdom

come, Stavros would never be satisfied. Rational thought didn't reside in this space where he craved his captor's touch.

How could he let that happen? When did he let it happen?

Sometimes when he looked into Daniel's eyes the grief was as fresh as if Stavros had committed the act mere days ago. Stavros loved Annika, yes. But he hadn't spent decades married to her, and most importantly, she hadn't loved him back. Daniel and Petra Nieto, they'd been in love for a lifetime. He hadn't thought about that back then. He'd done the job. He was a goddamn mercenary, he always did the job.

Now, he wasn't sure if it was penance, his way of begging forgiveness or mercy. But what he felt, it made no sense.

He was who Daniel thought him to be, a monster, wrecker of lives. He wore the skin of that man with no remorse. He couldn't afford to be vulnerable to Daniel again.

He paced the small room. They'd unchained him, allowing him free movement inside the room. Every day the doctor—Boyd—visited, bringing food, flanked by three armed guards with assault rivals, wearing balaclavas to hide their faces.

Daniel had changed things up for sure, and though Stavros now had a comfortable bed and could use the bathroom without an escort, he was still a captive. He'd asked the good doctor once just how long Stavros had been in Daniel's company.

Two weeks.

The way he felt, it could have just as easily been a lifetime.

His uncle must be frantic. With no children of his own, Stavros was the only family Christophe had left. Everyone likely thought him dead, killed off by one of the many enemies Stavros had made over the years. He'd never been one for diplomacy or restraint, and in his business, there were a lot of people who took offense to that.

Like he gave a fuck. Not then, and not even now.

A key jiggled in the lock and he stalled his pacing. Boyd had already brought him his food, maybe about an hour ago, so it wasn't meal time yet. He waited for the doctor and his armed men to enter.

Instead Daniel did.

Oh, sweet mercy.

Their eyes met the second Daniel stepped over the threshold. Stavros recognized his captor's smooth expression for the mask it was, hiding the

furor underneath.

He wore black, which Stavros also recognized as his armor. Black shirt, opened at the collar, tucked into black slacks, and black Italian shoes. His eyes, they pinned Stavros so thoroughly that it took him a moment to shake the dizzying sensation off and find his tongue.

“Mr. Nieto, how nice of you to show up.” He smirked.

Daniel simply eyed him up and down, expressionless eyes taking in the generic white t-shirt, gray sweats and white socks that had become Stavros’ uniform. He stood at the door, hands going into his pockets as they stared at each other.

Three days. Stavros still felt Daniel’s weight on top of him, pinning him to that fucking bed. He smelled him, warm, confused lust. And he felt his touch. The hesitant slide of his tongue that quickly turned vicious with a little coaxing from Stavros. Three days, and during Daniel’s absence, even now, he felt the caress of Daniel’s rough fingertips along his jaw as if it were happening now.

All over again.

Daniel didn’t seem to have that same problem. His eyes remained blank, mouth shaped into a flat line. “Word is your people have given up looking for you.” His lips curved then, the tiniest bit, but Stavros stared at it. “They didn’t look very long, did they?”

Stavros shrugged. “I didn’t expect them to look at all, so…” That wasn’t a lie. His people knew better that to abandon their assignments to focus on him.

Daniel walked toward him slowly, eyes locked on Stavros’ face. As if he couldn’t look away. As if he didn’t want to look away. Even though his breath turned choppy and his pulse kicked up, Stavros held his ground and didn’t blink when Daniel stopped inches away from him.

“Tell me something…” He crossed his arms, elbows barely brushing Daniel’s chest. The other man’s nostrils flared at the faint contact. “Did you spend as much time with the people who contracted me to kill your wife, or am I the only special one?”

Daniel’s smile, it chilled Stavros. Goosebumps erupted along his forearms, and he ignored the urge to rub his hands over them.

“Everyone’s been dealt with. You’re the only one left.”

Shit.

His surprise must have showed, because Daniel regarded him as if he were a naïve child. “You seem to think there are lines I won’t cross, Mr. Konstantinou. And if I recall correctly, not too long ago you were also intent on killing my brother’s husband. A federal agent.” He leaned forward, breath teasing at Stavros’ cheek when he said, “Let me assure you, so you can put any doubts aside, there is nothing I will not do. And there is no life I will spare.” He pulled back to lock eyes with Stavros again. “Not even yours.”

“Do you think she would be proud of that fact?” Stavros asked him. “Do you think your Petra would want all that blood spilled in her name?”

Daniel backhanded him, a blow so hard and unexpected—he should have anticipated it, though—it knocked Stavros backward and into the wall. But before his back connected with the hard surface, Nieto was on him, hand around his throat.

“Never say her name.” Spit flew as he snarled in Stavros’ face. “You don’t deserve to say her name.”

Stavros clawed at the hand at his throat, struggling, gasping, but Daniel’s hold didn’t budge.

“Why don’t we ask her what she thinks?” Daniel roared. “Why don’t we ask her?” He shook Stavros, slamming his head back.

Fuck. He saw stars.

“We can’t ask her, because you took her from me. You took her from me.” Under the rage, under the red-hot anger, was the grief. Stavros heard it, and it called at him.

Instinctively, his body struggled at the pressure against his windpipe. But Stavros forced himself to stop, to relax into it. Into the unknown rushing up at him. Heart racing, the fear exhilarating.

“You don’t know what it’s like to have happiness,” Daniel told him in that harsh, torn-up voice as his hold abruptly loosened. “You’re always so ready to destroy what others have, because you’ve never had it. Because you want it for yourself.”

Stavros’ eyes shot open as he coughed. Those words hit him in the chest, closer to the truth that he cared to admit. “If you loved her so much, why am I not dead?” he asked.

Against him, Daniel tensed.

“If you loved her so much, why do you touch me the way you do? Why do you kiss me the way you do?”

Daniel’s fist connected with his stomach, and Stavros doubled over.

Goddamn, that hurt.

He hugged his middle and chuckled. “If you loved her so much, how come I can send you to your knees?”

Daniel grabbed him by the hair, fisted it, and hauled him upright, slamming him back against the wall.

Fuck.

Stavros couldn’t breathe. His legs were wet noodles, unable to hold him up. Daniel’s body pressed to his kept him on his feet. The other man’s eyes blazed at him when their gazes met.

“You want to die tonight?” Daniel asked. “Is that it?”

Stavros licked at the blood on his bottom lip and the cut there stung. “I want what you want. Fuck me. Kill me.” He shrugged in Daniel’s hold. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

They weren’t fighting anymore. They were pressed so tight against each other, almost like an embrace, Stavros’ back to the wall, and Daniel’s hard body on him. Stavros felt every inch of him. Every ridge.

Especially the thick, promising curve of Daniel’s erection.

Jesus. Stavros touched him, a hand on the middle of his back. Daniel flinched, he felt it, saw it in the depths of his eyes. But he didn’t move away. The heat of him burned through to Stavros’ palm.

Incredibly, unbelievably, Stavros’ entire being shook. Like a nervous virgin, the way he felt. Fire stroked at his belly, hardening him. Daniel’s grip on his hair tightened and he tugged.

Stavros inhaled, taking Daniel’s musk of skin and man and lust into his lungs.

“Why doesn’t it matter?” Daniel asked in a murmur. The fingers of his other hand stroked Stavros’ chin, gliding through the blood there. “Tell me.” He pushed his fingers, tipped with blood, into Stavros’ mouth.

Mother. Fucker.

He latched on, moaning. Daniel groaned, and his lashes fluttered, hiding his eyes from Stavros. He sucked on those thick fingers, his hand on Daniel’s back curling to claw at him.

Digging in.

Holding on.

He bucked against Daniel, and the other man’s breath hitched.

“Stavros.” His fingers tunneled in and out of Stavros’ mouth, rough. Hitting the back of his throat, pressing down and making him gag. A punishment in itself.

Stavros shook his head. He didn’t want to answer questions. He wanted to suck on anything Daniel had to offer. His fingers. His mouth. His cock.

Hell, even his ass.

The fingers went away with a wet pop.

Ungh.

No. Stavros grabbed at the retreating hand, but Daniel dropped it to his side.

“Stavros.”

He gaped. It hadn’t register before, Daniel’s use of his name. On his tongue, on his voice, harsh and rugged it ripped at Stavros. He touched his hand to Daniel’s stubbled cheek.

“Because it doesn’t matter,” he said. God, his voice was husky, still loaded down with the lust that rode him so hard. “I don’t care.” Not right then.

Caught in Daniel’s gaze, Stavros watched himself trip and fall. Leaving his neck wide open, unprotected. Barriers crashing and crumbling. He might die in this place, which was a distinct possibility.

But Daniel’s breath had turned choppy, lips parted as he refused to budge.

This thing, Stavros wanted it. He ached to give in to it.

He made the first move this time.

Taking.

Slamming his mouth down on Daniel’s.

He’d been waiting, because Daniel opened immediately for Stavros, sweeping in. Those strokes, they made him quiver. Made him arch, and press closer.

Desperation.

Both of them taking even though they knew, it could never happen. It should never happen. All the lust swirling hot and thick in Stavros’ groin hardened him. And he rubbed, clutching Daniel to him.

Grinding.

But the guilt, something he didn’t recall ever experiencing before, twisted his insides. The lines he’d crossed, the things he’d done. Taking

what Daniel offered up with those grunts and the wild trusts of his tongue was selfish.

Fuck. It.

Stavros sipped on him, and Daniel flowed over and into him like water.

Water.

He swallowed him down, letting Daniel cool him. Letting him soak those dark hidden places, parched and desolate.

Water.

Like that precious commodity, suddenly Daniel was everything Stavros needed. So he drank, hands dropping low to grab onto Daniel's ass and spin them until Daniel was the one against the wall. Until Daniel was the one staring at Stavros with need in those cloudy eyes, waiting for the next move.

What they were doing, how they'd gotten to this place, the unspoken swirled around them. Thickening the air between them even more. All the reasons why the only answer to all the questions would be no.

But Daniel brushed a lock of hair from Stavros' forehead.

So Stavros *had* to fucking kiss him again, shove his tongue deep enough to choke. He had to fuck his mouth and eat at him, bite and tear at this man with his teeth. Even when Daniel's head banged against the wall, Stavros didn't stop. Because Daniel didn't want him to, not with the way he moaned.

Not with the way he rocked forward, pushing his erection against Stavros' own.

Not even when he tore his mouth away, and tipped his head back, exposing his throat for Stavros to dip his head, licking at the scars around Daniel's throat until the other man shuddered, yanking on Stavros' hair and whispering, "Diablo. Oh, Dios."

Stavros tore at Daniel's shirt, taking one step back and yanking it open.

Buttons fell at his socked feet as the material came apart, exposing Daniel's naked chest. The smile that had been forming on Stavros' mouth froze.

Cracked.

Shattered.

She sat there, on his skin, in colorful ink. Her name tattooed all over his torso. About a dozen different sizes, a dozen different fonts. But she was

there. Over his heart she shined brighter in a fancy script font. Her name, a date, followed by the words, *sangre por sangre.*

Blood for blood.

All inside the outline of a broken black heart.

Stavros' bones never felt so heavy. He never felt so stripped. And he'd never wanted something he could never have more than right this second. He'd thought not having Annika had been the worst.

Wrong.

Daniel joined him in that fatalistic silence, and they stared at each other. Each man knowing…

"This can never happen."

Stavros was the one to put it to words, but Daniel didn't contradict him. In fact, his captor looked shell-shocked. As if he'd just caught on to the realization that he was about to cross that line, betray his wife with the man whose hands were soaked in blood he could never wash away. He'd never apologized. Had never considered the possibility that he should.

Why would he? He'd only been the messenger.

But a fresh wave of devastation crashed over Daniel's face, and Stavros stepped forward. "Daniel—"

The bedroom door splintered open.

"Hands up! Hands up!"

Masked gunmen ran in, assault rifles pointed at both Stavros and Daniel. What the fuck? Awareness took its slow time coming as Stavros stared. Daniel didn't move, so Stavros figured they were his men.

Until one of the five men stepped forward and pressed his gun to Daniel's temple. "Hands the fuck up," he spat in a distinctive Brooklyn accent. "That repeat was a courtesy, and your only warning. Next time, I'm squeezing on your ass."

Daniel lunged, grabbing the speaker by the throat.

"Aye. Aye."

The unmistakable pressure at the base of Stavros' skull pissed him off, but he held himself still, hands spread wide as he waited. This is what happened when you let your thirst guide your actions. You let your guard down, and strangers just walked the fuck on in.

"Calm the fuck down, Nieto," the man behind Stavros said. "Something tells me you want to be the one to do the honors with this one." He thumped Stavros with the gun. "Let him go, and step back. Nice and fucking slow."

Stavros didn’t think he would, but Daniel dropped his hand, face impassive as he faced the rest of the intruders.

“Good grip there, B,” the one with the gun on Daniel addressed him. “Impressive.”

“What is this?” Daniel asked. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“We’re just here for the Greek.”

Stavros cocked his head. “Wait, you’re here to kidnap me from my kidnapper?” Seriously?

The man behind him chuckled. “Nah. We’re your rescuers. You’re welcome.”

Wha—”

Daniel stepped forward, a hand outstretched.

Pop. Pop.

Daniel flinched, staggered then crumpled to the floor.

“No.” Stavros dropped to his knees. Daniel watched him with heavy-lidded eyes, not saying anything as blood soaked the front of his shirt. “Fuck.” Stavros jerked his head up. “Help him,” he demanded.

“Relax.” One of the masked men yanked him upright. “He’ll be aight. You know those Nieto fuckers can’t die.”

The rest of the men chuckled.

Stavros punched the one holding him in the throat, and made a grab for the gun when the other man staggered.

Someone else sidled closer and stuck a gun in Stavros’ ribs. “Touch him again, and I’m going to forget this is a rescue mission. You fucking feel me?”

“JP, cool it.”

“I’m tired of being threatened. And death doesn’t scare me.” Stavros met each pair of eyes, the only features he could make out under the balaclavas. “So I’m gonna have to ask you to fuck off.”

“Hmm. He really is as annoying as they say.”

“Somebody patch dude up, so we can ghost this joint.”

“I’m staying,” Stavros said.

“The fuck you are.” Two of the five men flanked him. “Start walking.”

“Daniel—”

“Daniel kidnapped and tortured you, and you’re worried about him?” The one who’d pointed the gun at Daniel snickered. “Must be something ’bout that Nieto dick.”

Stavros ignored that. “Who hired you to find me?” He doubted his uncle was behind this.

“You’ll find out soon enough, just keep walking.”

Shit. He hated this entire goddamn situation. And he should be eager to get the hell out of there. But Daniel was bleeding out on the floor and Stavros wanted to go to him. “Please tell me you brought me clothes.” He tugged on the t-shirt he wore. “I’m sick of fucking t-shirt and sweats.”

“Somebody get him some clothes so he can shut the hell up.”

A bag was shoved into his hands, and Stavros got dressed right there, putting on the dark suit and matching shoes that fit perfectly while men pointed their guns at him. When they finished bandaging a silent Daniel and handcuffed him to the foot of the bed, Stavros approached him.

And he got on his knees for his captor. “So. Round two?”

“How?” Daniel asked, and Stavros knew he was asking about what just happened. If Stavros was behind the rescue.

He ignored the question, and touched Daniel instead, swiping a thumb over his cheek, over some of those pained lines then down to his lips. “I’ve never felt so fucking alive, do you know that? This time with you I’ve never felt so fucking much.”

Daniel watched him closely.

Stavros traced Daniel’s top lip. Then the bottom. “Estás loco.” *You’re crazy.* “And I fucking like it.”

“You swear a lot,” Daniel said roughly.

He chuckled. “I’ve got a filthy mouth.”

Daniel’s gaze dropped to Stavros’ lips.

“Maybe it will go away,” Stavros said softly. “What you feel. When I’m gone, it will go away.” He dropped his hand and stood. “I want it to go away.” For Daniel’s sake. But what Stavros felt, it wouldn’t go away. He already knew and accepted it. So he gave Daniel Nieto his back, and he walked away.

To the door.

Hand on the knob, and he stopped. Leaned against the door. Walking away from the man who’d held him captive shouldn’t be this hard. Walking away from Daniel Nieto shouldn’t be this hard.

“Round two,” Daniel said from behind him. “I look forward to it.”

Stavros smiled. He didn’t look back, but he held up two fingers, the universal sign for peace.

And a signal for the number of rounds they were up to now.

Then he went through the door.

“Let’s get the fuck out.” They did. Out the front door. Sunlight hit his face as they exited the building, blinding his vision.

Dizzying him.

He stumbled, and someone grabbed his shoulder. “Where are we?”

“Brooklyn, son.”

He looked back at the house he’d just left. A detached brownstone. Jesus. He knew he’d been back in the States, but Daniel kept him in Brooklyn this entire time?

His knees gave out.

Fuck.

He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When he came to in the hospital, Stavros' unknown rescuers were gone. His uncle sat at his bedside, frantic and demanding answers. Christophe hadn't been the one to mount a rescue. In fact, he had no clue where Stavros had been. Or who'd taken him.

Daniel covered his tracks pretty good.

Christophe wanted to send some of their men after Daniel, but Stavros shut that shit down fast. He'd go after Daniel in his own time. At his own pace. He had to deal with himself first.

The man he'd been at the villa in Lisbon wasn't the same man occupying the narrow hospital bed. The obvious reason should be that he'd been held captive and tortured, but all that bloodshed seemed incidental compared to that other matter.

When he'd first stirred in the hospital bed, he'd assumed he was back in that place with Daniel, and the desperate hope had warmed his cold spaces. Making him smile, until the I.V. in his arm corrected him.

Disappointment kept him company inside the small private hospital suite for four days. He felt fine, but the doctors diagnosed him with dehydration and under-nourishment. Plus his body was still working through the infection that came from Henan's bullet. All that time as Daniel's captive and now sidelined by fucking doctors. At Christophe's insistence, two armed guards vetted anyone who came into his room. He allowed his uncle the indulgence, but if they didn't let him out by tomorrow he'd be walking the fuck out.

This wasn’t where he was supposed to be. Staring up at the ceiling while running through everything that happened in his head wasn’t what he was supposed to be doing. He should be planning an attack of some kind against Daniel, but something inside him felt stunted. He didn’t know if Daniel was even alive. Those men shot him. And Stavros just walked away, as if they hadn’t been halfway down each other’s throat seconds prior.

As if Daniel hadn’t rooted around inside him, found every needy part of him—those parts he’d sought so hard to destroy after Annika—and laid them bare.

All his fault lines, Daniel exposed them.

If those masked men hadn’t stormed into the brownstone, where would he and Daniel be? If he hadn’t known before how much of a mistake that kiss had been, the sight of Daniel’s wife’s name tattooed all over his chest and torso set Stavros straight.

Nowhere. They would be nowhere.

What right did he have to any of it? What business did he have, reminiscing on those stolen kisses as if they mattered?

A throat cleared, and Stavros sat up. A man stood at the entrance to his room. Gorgeous, smiling face framed by white-blond hair and purple eyes shining like precious stones. Barely standing more than five feet, the stranger’s slender frame was clad in a perfectly tailored dark suit.

“Mr. Konstantinou.”

“Who are you?” Maybe he should be more than slightly annoyed that a stranger was in his room, but he couldn’t manage more than a frown.

“Syren Rua.” The stranger walked over, head held out in greeting.

Stavros ignored it. “What do you want?” The name wasn’t unfamiliar. In fact, that name carried a whole lot of weight behind it. The Brazilian was supposed to be a power player in the criminal underworld.

Why was he at Stavros’ bedside?

His unwanted guest clicked his tongue. “Is that any way to greet the only soul brave enough to sneak past those armed men outside?” He sat in the armchair at the foot of Stavros’ hospital bed.

“I don’t usually repeat myself, Mr. Rua, but I’ll make an exception, since you’re new and all.” Stavros held his gaze. “What the fuck do you want?”

Syren’s lips curved. “Heard you were gone for a while. Now you’re back.”

“A man with a reputation like yours keeping tabs on me?” Stavros cocked his head. “Should I be worried?”

“It’s not every day the head of one of the most lucrative mercenary agencies around disappears without a trace.” The other man shrugged. “People were taking bets on how exactly you’d meet your demise.”

“You sound disappointed,” Stavros said. “Did you have plans for my corpse?”

“Not disappointed.” Syren shook his head as he got to his feet. “Just curious.” He walked over and stood next to the bed. “Would you have stayed?”

Stavros tensed. Then he tilted his head all the way back so their eyes could meet. “Repeat yourself.”

Syren grinned. “If he’d asked you to stay, to remain in that bedroom with the handcuffs around your wrist and the chains around your ankles…” He bent closer, almost whispering. “Would you have stayed? If the answer is yes, what is the reason? Guilt or Daniel?”

Son of a— “You know.” Syren knew where he’d been and with whom?

The Brazilian straightened. “Very few things I don’t know, Mr. Konstantinou. I traffic in information.” He tugged on the front of his jacket. “You’re welcome, by the way. My men tell me you weren’t quite happy to be out of that house.”

What the fuck? Stavros lurched forward, grabbing him by the front of his shirt. “That was you? You got me out of there?” What the hell was this?

“That was me. Yes.” Syren nodded.

“Why?” he snarled. “How did you know? Tell me.”

If Syren was put off by the assault and blatant demand he didn’t show it. Instead, he calmly pried Stavros’ fingers off him, and smoothed his clothes. “I know a lot of things. Like I said, it’s kind of my business.”

“Fuck that. How did you know he had me? When did you know?”

“He’s a resourceful man, isn’t he?” Syren patted Stavros’ knee. “And you two, so much alike. Am I right?” He chuckled at a joke only he got.

Frustration bubbled up. “Tell me.”

“Do you want to know where he is? Because I heard something about an impending second round.”

Stavros stared at him. His immediate answer to that question was yes. He wanted to see Daniel again. Touch him again. Fight with him again. But that wasn’t his rational brain working. “Why would you do that?” He didn’t

trust Syren, not one bit. “He tried to kill me. The next time we see each other, one of us *will* die.”

“Really.” One of Syren’s eyebrows shot up. “From what I hear, you fired the first shot by killing his wife. He’s only returning fire.”

“It was a job. I did a goddamn job,” Stavros snapped. “How is it everyone wants to punish the fucking messenger? It was nothing personal.”

“Hey, I get it.” Hands held up in a sign of surrender, Syren asked, “Do you expect it to go away, what you feel for him? Or are you hoping it won’t?”

How could he know? When had Stavros become transparent? He blanked his features and simply watched Syren until his visitor barked a laugh and clapped his hands.

“He doesn’t have friends,” Syren said. “That’s not the man he is. And the family he does have alive, he’s keeping them at arm’s length. Revenge is all he knows. Vengeance is what he lives and breathes for.” Syren’s gaze turned haunted. “At least I thought so, until he snatched you in Lisbon.”

Stavros closed his eyes. “Don’t tell me this. I don’t want to know.” Those words made him feel things when he’d been lying in this fucking hospital bed doing anything he could to not feel.

“You must know.”

“Why?” He lifted his lashes and glared at Syren. Did he know what he was doing? “Why do I have to know?”

“That way when you retaliate against him, you won’t forget.” Syren made his way to the door. “Something you both should already know, but I’m telling you now: sometimes it is necessary to lose the battle in order to win the war.” He stopped and looked over his shoulder. “In this war between you and him, someone must lose. But if you’re fighting for the right thing, the same thing, losing can be a different, sweeter kind of victory.”

“You took him.” From the darkness of the living room, Daniel sat in the comfortable armchair as Syren Rua stepped inside with his family.

The only eyes that widened when the overhead light flooded the room, were that of the little boy in Syren’s arms, and the girl tucked in between

her fathers. She looked nothing like either of the men, save for the eyes. Not the color or shape, but the fearlessness.

The stubbornness.

Likely Syren didn't think Daniel knew about the house in Connecticut, but just because they worked together didn't mean Daniel trusted his partner in crime. Just like Syren knew his weak spots, so did Daniel know his.

He pressed on those spots now as he rose slowly from the chair, shoulder protesting the movement.

"Cátia," Syren didn't look away from Daniel. "Take your brother upstairs."

"Papa—"

"Now, Cátia." Kane Ashby touched the single braid hanging down his daughter's back. Unlike his husband, he didn't bother hiding his anger at Daniel's intrusion into their lives.

The girl—Cátia—narrowed her eyes at Daniel, fisting her small hands before she finally turned away, taking her brother into her arms, and stomping away, up the stairs.

Daniel gave the two men the courtesy of waiting until a door slammed upstairs before he stepped forward, and spoke again. "You took him."

"I did." Syren nodded, putting a hand on his husband's arm when Kane opened his mouth.

The rage inside, he'd swallowed it, keeping it tamped down since the men burst through his doors a week ago. He didn't like feeling helpless, and he'd felt nothing but when those men turned their guns on Stavros. Being outmanned and outgunned never stopped him before. It should have never stopped him, but that visual of a gun to Stavros' head stopped him in his tracks.

Flashbacks of Petra should have served as a push, but all it did was temper his actions. All it did was force the choice.

Stavros alive.

He wanted Stavros alive. Unhurt.

"Explain." He didn't bother raising his voice. His presence in this house alone should serve as the warning and the threat.

"The mission has changed." Syren shrugged. "I proceeded accordingly."

"Not your call to make."

“I beg to differ.” For a second, pity flashed like purple-neon lights in the depths of Syren’s eyes. “It was a call you couldn’t make.”

Hijo de— “He killed my wife.”

“And if you wanted him dead, he’d be dead already.” Syren stepped away from his silent husband and shrugged out of his jacket, dropping in onto the nearby couch. He held Daniel’s gaze as he rolled up his sleeves. “It can’t be a good feeling to find out mid-fight that the course of the battle has shifted.” Going back to his husband’s side, he grabbed Kane’s hand and linked their fingers. “I’ve been there.”

Daniel stared at him, ignoring the words. “I underestimated you.”

Syren smiled. “Yes. But don’t worry, I get that a lot.” He winked. “In fact, I count on it.”

An obvious trap Daniel should have seen. But he’d been blinded by Stavros, by the confusion his captive brought. “Where is he?”

“Why?” Syren’s eyebrows shot up. “So you can drag him back to your torture chambers and bleed him again? Tell me…” He walked over, standing directly in front of Daniel as his husband tensed behind him. “Is it still torture if the captive wants it? It might be punishment, but whose? His or yours?”

“You know nothing.” All along he’d known Syren saw too much. All along Daniel had known that eventually, he’d have to atone. He just never expected Syren Rua to be the one to speak the harsh words that peeled away the layers of denial to illuminate the facts underneath.

Syren laughed. “Oh, I know. Trust me, I know.” He clapped Daniel on the shoulder. “The weakness you had a month ago is not the same one you have today. I saw it, and I was able to use it to get him away from you. Because I think hurting him will hurt you more.” His voice dropped, turning husky with a rough type of emotion when he said, “Killing him will kill you.”

The truth of those words staggered him, and Daniel stiffened his spine to keep from staggering away. “Petra.” He had nothing else beyond that. Nothing else beyond her name, and the guilt that exploded inside him ten-fold.

“She’s gone.” Syren nodded. “By his hand. Has he fought you?”

Not once. In fact, he’d egged Daniel on. Pushed him. “He accepts it,” he murmured as Stavros’ words echoed in his head.

Kiss me. Kill me.

I don’t care.

It no longer matters.

“He might not ask, but he wants your forgiveness. And he might not tell you outright, but he’ll gladly walk into your blade.”

Daniel lifted his focus from Syren to find Kane gone. He narrowed his gaze and glanced around. The former Federal Marshal stood in a doorway behind him, hands in his pockets. Caught up in Syren’s words, Daniel had failed to notice when the man moved. He peeled his lips back in the appearance of smile. “You’re good.”

“I am better than the best,” Syren said without a hint of brag in his voice. “I’m also not wrong, and you know this.”

“You betrayed me,” Daniel told him. “Whatever your justification, you won’t get a second shot at it.”

“You call it betrayal, I call it a chance.” Syren blew out a breath, gaze flickering over Daniel’s shoulder to his husband before returning to Daniel. “I’m fully aware that if the roles were reversed, I would be standing where you stand right now. Hell, I’ve already been there. But I’m also here, on this side, because I made a choice. I chose to let go of the darkness inside. I chose to let someone close. I chose to let him love me. And I also chose to believe that when it came down to loving and being loved that I had any choice at all.”

Daniel shook his head. Eso es imposible.

“He is free. His choice and yours, too, will be what happens in this second round. More bloodshed?”

“That is your reason?” Daniel grabbed him by the throat, and instantly a gun was at his nape. He ignored the Marshal’s silent threat. “That is the reason you took him?”

“That is my reason.” Syren didn’t struggle. “What was yours?”

“Release my husband.” Kane’s voice rumbled in Daniel’s ear. “Nice and slow.”

In response, Daniel tightened his hold, choking Syren until he coughed. Still, the shorter man didn’t struggle. He kept his wide eyes on Daniel.

“It can’t all be about revenge,” Syren croaked. “It can’t all be about anger, because those things fizzle out after a while, and you’ll be emptier than you’ve ever been. I understand allegiance and loyalty, but you’re not dead. You’re not unfeeling, and even though you hate it, he’s the reason.”

Daniel's fingers flexed, the still healing bullet wound in his shoulder protesting the strain of his hold on Syren. "Do not speak." He shook Syren, shook him until the man stopped talking. Inside him though, the cracking in his chest got louder, echoing in his ears, drowning out any other sound.

Syren's lips moved again, and the gun at Daniel's nape poked him. But in his head, Petra's dying words warred with Stavros' parting words.

"Mátalos a todos," he whispered to Syren. "Kill them all, she told me. Mátalos a todos."

"So will you kill him for her?"

"The last thing she asked of me." Anguish loosened his grip, and though Syren slipped from his grasp, he didn't move away. "Her dying breath, and she spoke those words. I failed her before, I can't fail in this. Her death, it just can't be for nothing."

Disappointment clouded Syren's eyes. "Then you've made your choice, my friend. Marshal," he addressed his husband. "Put that gun away."

"Stop letting people put their fucking hands on you," his husband barked.

Tenderness lit up Syren's gaze, and his smile this time was all intimacy and love. At one time Daniel could claim a smile like that one as his own.

"Yes, sir." Syren winked at his husband then refocused on Daniel. "I reset the positions on the field," he told Daniel. "You and Stavros, you're now on even footing. Good luck."

"This stunt of yours, I won't forget it."

Syren shrugged. "Didn't think you would. But the next time you step into my home, I'm letting the sniper out on the roof next door take the shot." He nodded to an open window to Daniel's left, and a flash of light glinted in the darkness. "I cover all my bases, Daniel. And my family covers me."

If he wasn't all caught up in the fog of emotion, maybe Daniel would have smiled at him. "You won't kill me, and I won't kill you. We need each other alive."

"I don't need you alive," Kane spoke up. "You set foot in Connecticut again and you will die. That's a promise."

Daniel spun to face him and this time he did smile. "I admire a man who can keep his promises." He glanced toward the stairs and called out, "Toro, vámonos."

Seconds later, his nephew came clambering down the stairs, the family's dog in his arms, happily licking his face. He saluted them with his gun as he stood next to Daniel.

"Son of a bitch!" Kane swore.

"Marshal—"

Together with Toro, Daniel left the house the way he came.

Through the front door.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They read like jagged cracks on an otherwise smooth rock façade.

Stavros stood in front the large mirror in the master bathroom of his apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, naked. He touched the scars on his torso, tracing each one.

Remembering.

Not as if there was any forgetting.

He knew when and how he'd gotten each scar, each bruise that hadn't yet disappeared in the three weeks he'd been out of Daniel Nieto's grasp. So much time gone and he still felt Daniel's reluctant touch. It was a permanent brand, and when he slid his hand up to his nape or front and across to his chin, he still got burned by Daniel's heat.

Fuck!

He punched the mirror, swallowing a grunt at the sharp pain. Blood immediately dripped from his cut knuckles, but the mirror didn't break. It cracked, turning his image into four different entities. They all stared back at him with bloodshot eyes.

Mocking.

Feelings. He didn't do feelings. He didn't do emotion. Yet everything about his interactions with Daniel was about feelings. About emotion. Hate. Anger. Want. Lust.

Hate and anger went deeper, but the others… He couldn't be sure. Did he just want to fuck Daniel? Did he just want to submit and watch the other man do the same? Was it all about the war between them?

Another thought pushed forward in his brain, widening his eyes.

Was it guilt, this thing inside him? Was he feeling guilty for killing Petra Nieto and trying to find a way to make up for it? That thought, more than the others, horrified him.

He didn't do guilt.

Anything but guilt.

"Sir." Bruce rushed into the room, gun in his hand, nothing but black briefs on. He stopped abruptly when he spotted Stavros. "Sir?"

"I'm okay, Bruce." He didn't look away from the mirror. "Come here."

Bruce's eyes flashed as he drew closer. They had an arrangement, he and Bruce. Didn't matter where they were or who they—meaning Bruce—were with. When Stavros wanted to fuck Bruce, his bodyguard dropped his pants and bent over. And when he wanted to be fucked, Bruce took direction well.

It wasn't a relationship, but it was convenient. Like now, when Stavros needed to wipe away the lingering feel of someone else from his skin.

He took two steps back from the mirror without turning around, and motioned Bruce to his knees in front of him with his back to the cracked mirror. When Bruce moved to put the gun down on the floor, Stavros grasped him by the neck, shaking his head when Bruce gazed up at him.

"Keep the gun." He licked his lips. "Use it. Make me come with it."

This wasn't the most fucked up request Stavros had made during sex so Bruce didn't even blink. He simply grasped Stavros' hard shaft and sucked him down.

Stavros threw his head back, tightening his grasp on Bruce's nape. Eyes closed, as the gun slid past his balls and over his taint. He gasped and shuddered, knees weakening.

He'd become something of an expert at pretending lately. Nails digging into Bruce's nape as the other man's wet mouth worked him over good, Stavros pretended someone else was rubbing the tip of the gun over his hole. Someone else was sucking his brain out of his cock. Someone else was soaking him in saliva and swirling their tongue over his crown, making him groan.

Making his belly tighten.

Someone else.

He moved his hand up, threading his fingers in Bruce's short blond hair and gripping him tighter. Yanking on the strands as he slammed down his

throat, snapping his head back. Bruce grunted. His slick grip on Stavros loosened a bit, but Stavros held him steady.

Punishing his throat as Bruce choked.

Punishing himself. Fighting harder than ever to get his mind back. Get his head straight. The gun at his hole faltered.

“Don’t stop,” he ordered hoarsely.

Bruce’s throat released him reluctantly and the other man looked up at him when Stavros glared. “Sir.” He coughed. “We need to get some lube.”

“No.”

Confusion darkened Bruce’s eyes. “Sir—”

He slapped him. Hard. “Don’t question me.” Again, and Bruce’s head bounced against the mirror. Stavros grabbed him by the throat and held him, pressing the back of his head against the jagged crack in the mirror. “Never question me,” he grated. He guided his shaft to Bruce’s mouth and pushed his way in. “Now, make me come.” He plunged in, and Bruce’s teeth grazed his length.

The right amount of pain to make his eyes roll back in his head.

The gun teased him as Bruce followed orders, eyes closed, color high on his cheekbones. Stavros used his mouth hard, riding him rough.

Digging deep in search of the orgasm that seemed to take longer to come these days. He squatted a little, opening himself so that the gun could breach him.

Fuck. His pulse tripped at that raw pain.

Bruce forced the gun in, but Stavros’ body wasn’t having it. Still he rolled his hips, allowing the hardness of the gun to graze him, hurt him.

He plunged in and out of Bruce’s throat, heaving, wanting…

Daniel.

He slid out of Bruce’s mouth slowing, keeping his swollen crown resting on Bruce’s bottom lip. “Pull the trigger.”

Bruce’s eyes went round and wide. “B-But, sir.”

“You pull your trigger or I pull mine.” He issued the threat easily. Meaning every single word. Death wish. He’d acquired a death wish, and the adrenaline pumped through his veins, hardening him way more than Bruce’s talented mouth ever did. “At the count of three.”

Bruce watched Stavros as if he no longer recognized him. Made two of them, didn’t it? Would Daniel care if Stavros died? Would he miss him? He tightened his grip on Bruce’s hair, holding the other man’s gaze.

“Éna,” he counted down in Greek.

One.

Bruce’s nostrils’ flared.

“Don’t worry.” He traced Bruce’s top lip with his leaking shaft. “You won’t be blamed for my death.”

Bruce’s breath turned choppy. The fear in his eyes? As much of an aphrodisiac as the immediate danger.

“Dýo.” *Two.*

Bruce’s lashes fluttered, and his naturally pale face flushed a dark red.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Stavros barked. “Look at me. Now.”

Those lashes flew open.

“Tría.” *Three.*

Click.

The gun jerked inside him, and Stavros erupted.

Convulsing.

Coming hard, cum hitting Bruce on his forehead, dripping down into his eyes and nose. Stavros hissed, vision flashing to black then gray as he shook.

God. He chewed on his bottom lip, stifling the name that immediately sprang to the tip of his tongue. He tipped forward, slamming a palm up against the mirror to keep his balance. The rough edges cut into his palm, adding another layer of sensation.

Fucked up didn’t begin to describe who he was.

Bending over Bruce, Stavros picked up the gun. One lick on the tip.

Then he fired.

The bullet flew past a flinching Bruce and embedded in the opposite wall.

“Don’t worry,” he told Bruce who stared at him with his mouth agape. “True monsters always find a way to escape death and live long lives.” He winked. “It’s a gift. And a curse.” He straightened. “The files I left on my bed, bring them to me in my office.”

The large yellow envelope had shown up two days ago, mixed in with his regular mail. Its contents, though, were anything but regular. He had no clue as to the sender or their motives. Inside the folder were names and addresses, and one blue Post-It note with the words *No Unnecessary Casualties* written in block letters and underlined twice.

Someone wanted him to go after Daniel Nieto, maybe even take him out. They just didn’t want credit for it. Unfortunately for them, Stavros had his own plans for Daniel. Still, he’d use the information handed to him if it guaranteed him Daniel.

In his office, he didn’t bother getting dressed. He poured himself a drink and stared at the files spread out on his desk. Three faces. His anger needed to be put to better use. He’d promised retribution, and something about a main course.

Time he delivered on that.

He held up his glass as a salute to the empty room. “Here’s to round two.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It remained untouched, the house he'd built for his wife. The house he couldn't get rid of. Daniel stood in the dining room, hands useless at his sides as he stared at the table in the center of the space, bringing their last night together into focus.

Not that he needed that imagery to remember.

They'd argued as he sat there, eating the dinner she'd prepared. She wanted things, and as much as he loved her he couldn't give them to her. He'd done his best to give her the world, keeping her safe and protected while making sure she'd wanted for nothing.

He'd thought his job done. He'd thought her happy, and he hadn't seen the emptiness she hid so well.

He moved to the table, pulled out the chair then sat in it. Head bowed, fingers tracing the patterns in the tablecloth.

She wanted children, and he didn't. Not because he didn't love his wife, not because he didn't want her happy. He'd been afraid. Tempting fate by falling in love and marrying into this business was one thing. Petra knew the facts, she made a choice to be with him, to stand with him.

But a child.

An innocent child.

He remembered his life with his father. Eduardo never wanted to be a father, but he managed to bring three boys into the world. To him, Daniel and Antonio were employees and he used them as such. He barely tolerated his wife, too busy bedding the women he trafficked

Daniel didn’t want to bring another life into the world. But Petra wore him down, she used his love for her against him, and soon they were trying to get pregnant.

Trying and trying…

And trying.

The day she died, they found out she couldn’t get pregnant. The relief he felt was intense and swift, and she’d seen it. Petra knew him so well. She’d seen it in his eyes, that betrayal.

She’d slapped him. Not one word from her, just the sting of her palm across his cheek. The shame he’d felt in that moment had been immeasurable. After all those years, after everything she’d had to deal with. All the things she’d witnessed. The loyalty she’d shown him. The support. The understanding. And he couldn’t be selfless enough to give her the one thing she’d asked of him?

She’d yelled at him as he ate, after staying out late to avoid the inevitable confrontation. Then she’d walked away into their bedroom. Daniel followed and he’d stood in the doorway, watching her.

Beautiful, brilliant, the kindest soul.

Whatever she wanted, she’d get. Whatever he had to do, he’d do. He’d told her just that after climbing onto their bed and putting his head in her lap. Begging for her forgiveness, explaining himself.

She’d stroked his head, staring down at him with those big brown eyes. He’d understood his luck then, having her in his life. The choice she’d made, to be with him, had not been an easy one. Her family never quite understood or warmed up to him. She’d chosen him. He was happy because of her.

The woman who tamed him.

He showed her his gratitude then, making love to her, promising they’d look into adopting the following day.

But there’d been no tomorrow.

He rose from the table and walked to the bedroom. A thick layer of dust sat on the furniture in there. The bed was still there, the mattress and box spring. Beside that bed, on her side—the left, farthest away from the door—he fell to his knees. All breath was ripped from his lungs that night. His skin torn off his bones. His heart shredded in his chest. They took every single thing in one second.

“Petra.” He called her name, both hands grabbing on to the bare mattress. “Petra.”

Somehow he still expected her petite frame to enter the room, blowing strands of curly honey-brown hair away from her face like she always did. “¿Qué pasa, mi amor?” she’d ask.

“Mi corazón.” He buried his face in the mattress. “Lo siento.” He’d made promises to her and broken every last one. Promises to protect her. To love her forever. “Lo siento.”

How could she understand when he didn’t understand it himself? How could he explain the unexplainable?

“Petra.” He lifted his head, stared up at the ceiling. “Por favor, perdóname.” He got onto the bed, a move so familiar, he had to slam his eyes shut. In her spot, he stretched out on his back, hands clasped over his belly.

With his eyes closed, he journeyed through the lifetime he’d spent in this house, in this room, in this bed. So much laughter, so much love. He hadn’t thought himself worthy of it for the longest time. The things he did outside these walls, horrifically inexcusable. But she made this his sanctuary. She made this place somewhere evil never touched. It was as though she purged all his bad deeds away the instant he stepped into their home.

But she wasn’t perfect. Hadn’t been flawless. She was just his, and though he’d known from the first time he’d lain eyes on her that she deserved more than him, he would never give her up.

Her death changed nothing.

He’d died with her, as he’d wanted it. Except Stavros Konstantinou touched him and breathed new life into Daniel’s numb body. Denying that would be to lie to himself, and Daniel couldn’t do that.

Not in this house.

It took strength he’d thought he no longer possessed to watch Stavros walk away from him. Even more strength to not immediately go charging off in search of him, and bringing him back to that dark bunker.

His body was interested in another man. Aroused by another man. Just admitting that sent his head spinning. He’d experienced nothing like that before. No man had ever turned his head or stirred his body. He’d thought he knew who he was, but that was no longer true.

Being attracted to Stavros called into question his very sanity when he'd been sure he was long gone off the deep end. He tried to imagine how his wife would've reacted to that. His betrayal for wanting the man who'd stolen her life.

He lived in Daniel's dreams, all tangled up with images of Petra and blood.

Petra screaming, bleeding, and Stavros trying to hurt her.

Daniel having to make a choice.

Petra or Stavros.

Sometimes he chose Petra and she died in his arms. Sometimes he chose Stavros and he killed Petra in front of Daniel's eyes. And sometimes Daniel forced himself awake before he could make a terrible decision.

Nothing he did was right anymore. Nothing he did could bring Petra back or erase what now coursed through his veins for Stavros. But he could focus on what he could change, what he could control.

The time had come.

Daniel walked into the restaurant, gaze straight ahead, hands in his pockets amid wide eyes, dropped jaws, and all around shocked faces. Back from the dead, and nobody bothered to search him for weapons as he headed inside the taquería for a meeting with Felipe Guzmán.

"That's Daniel Nieto," the men whispered among themselves loud enough for him to hear.

"Thought he was dead."

"Crazy motherfucker can't be killed."

He'd made the call to Felipe himself. They used to be family. Now all they had between them was Felipe's knife in Daniel's back. Forget family.

There was no family in business.

Felipe thought him lacking in resources and support. Daniel got that in the two minute phone call the night before. He did nothing to dissuade that kind of thinking.

As he stepped into the taquería, Felipe was there, rising from his table in the middle of the place with a smile, flanked by at least five men with guns pointed at Daniel.

He stopped, and waited as they moved to search him.

“No,” Felipe said. “Show the man some respect. He is family.” He waved away his men. “Daniel Nieto has come home to us. El hijo pródigo está de vuelta.” *The prodigal son is back.* Felipe dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a napkin and wiped his hands before dropping it atop the table and walking to Daniel. “Mi hermano, so good to see you.”

“Felipe.” Daniel held out a hand to shake, but Felipe knocked it aside.

“Hermano.” He pulled Daniel into a quick hug before stepping back. “You have been missed.” He sounded sincere. “You and mi hermana—” He sketched the sign of the cross, kissed his fingers then pointed to the sky. “May she rest in peace.”

He’d braced himself for this meeting, but Felipe had his sister’s eyes and her coloring in face and hair. Daniel had somehow forgotten that. Just gazing at Petra’s brother made his throat ache, so he swallowed and nodded.

“Come.” Felipe touched his arm, and motioned for Daniel to join him at the table. “You hungry?” he asked when they were seated. “I can have them make you something.”

Daniel shook his head. “I am good.”

Felipe chuckled. “Never that. But where the hell have you been? We thought you were dead.”

“I had a bounty on my head. Didn’t know who to trust.” He shrugged. “I had to go underground.”

“Right. Fuck.” Felipe made a sound of disgust. “Snitches, huh? Fuckers need to die.” He sat back, gaze steady and heavy on Daniel’s face. “So why are you coming out of the shadows now? That bounty disappear?”

Yes, but he wasn’t telling Felipe that. “I’m sick of the shadows.” He mimicked Felipe’s position. “Then I hear there is a war and you’re in the middle of it?” He lifted an eyebrow. “You’re the man in charge.”

His former brother-in-law’s chest puffed up. “The people needed somebody, mi hermano. There was a vacuum when you left. Things got fragmented, and those loyal to the Nieto family were being exterminated. I took the initiative, you know? Banded the survivors together and created this.” He wave a hand. “Built on what you’d created.”

“I see.” Felipe had always wanted more. More power. More influence. He had an ego that needed constant stroking. His sister had been the one to warn Daniel to watch him, be wary of him. Which was why Daniel kept him as a solider, but with no true responsibility.

Interchangeable.

Felipe never liked feeling as if he could be replaced.

“My men and I—” Felipe leaned forward. “We’re grateful for what you started. The Nieto name is legend, and I know I’m grateful I had you to show me how things should and shouldn’t be done.”

Right. Daniel simply watched him.

“You need anything?” Felipe asked. “Somewhere to go? Money? Say the word.”

“So you are at war?”

Felipe dismissed his words with a harsh chuckle. “The Perez Boys are nothing more than a nuisance. Kids playing at cops and robbers. I can handle them.”

“You always were ambitious, Felipe.” Placing both hands flat on the table, he said, “You ask what I needed.”

“Name it and it’s yours.”

“You have something that belongs to me,” he said. “I want it back.”

Felipe’s brow furrowed. “What’s that?”

“My throne, of course. You didn’t think I’d stay dead, did you?”

A man like Felipe wouldn’t understand Daniel not wanting to take back what had once been his. Daniel gave him what he expected, staring into eyes so much like Petra’s that it was difficult for Daniel to hold his gaze and not flinch. Still, he managed.

“Daniel. Mi hermano.” Felipe shook his head, pity on his face. “Surely you must realize, the Nieto era has come and gone? Your entire family is gone, even my poor sister. The city—” He glanced out the window then back to Daniel. “She’s moved on. We think of the Nietos fondly, but that’s it. There’s no going back.”

But he forgot to mention the men he had out there at that very moment, hunting Daniel. “Is that so?” Daniel bit back a laugh.

“Look, don’t embarrass yourself, and me,” Felipe said softly. “You have no one behind you, and nothing to back up whatever it is you might have in mind. I know the Feds took away the money. You’re broke and alone, while I have the money, the man power and the resources.” He shook his head. “It won’t be a fair fight.”

Daniel smiled for the first time. “You’re not cut out for this, Felipe. Not if you think there’s anything called a fair fight in this world of ours.”

“But it’s no longer your world, is it?” Felipe narrowed his eyes. “Your shit landed on my sister. You escaped with that scar around your neck and

that fucked up voice, but she didn't have that luck, did she? She died for you. Because of you, and if you insist on staking claims I'm going to be forced to make you pay for what you did to her."

"You're welcome to do your worst." Felipe wasn't saying anything Daniel hadn't already told himself. He lived with that guilt. Nothing Felipe could do to him would hurt more than that. He rose from the table. "Some of us are cut out for the low life," he said. "And others, well…they're good pretenders. Why do you think I kept you as my lap dog, always fetching?" He winked at the tightening of Felipe's mouth as the other man struggled to keep his temper in check. "Salúdame a tú mamá por mí." *Say hello to your mother for me.* He walked away whistling.

Outside, he got into the SUV with blacked out windows and no plates, Toro at the wheel, and they peeled off. Of course, it wasn't long before they had another vehicle on their tail.

"He is the same," he told Toro tersely. "Still ego-filled."

Toro grunted. "But he is still her brother. Can you kill her brother?"

The question was valid, especially the way Felipe's familiar eyes gripped him earlier. "She knew who he was," Daniel said. "She warned me."

"And he now knows you're gunning for him," Toro pointed out, expertly navigating the streets in an attempt to lose the tail Felipe put on them.

"That is the plan. He thinks I am alone. Without resources. Most importantly, he thinks I am after what belongs to him."

Toro laughed. "He will learn soon enough." He pulled into their designated spot, a shopping mall's parking lot filled with cars. Quickly they hopped out and immediately got into the waiting silver sedan. They escaped Mexico City and got onto the plane sitting ready on the nearby airstrip.

The private plane was a constant lifesaver. Daniel was always on the move, from Mexico to New York, Florida, Seattle and Atlanta. He didn't like staying in one place too long, and having the plane at his disposal made it that much easier to disappear.

Felipe thought he had no money. What he didn't know was that while the Feds had indeed seized much of the Nietos' assets, there were still a dozen accounts scattered around the world the authorities had yet to find. And they never would.

In his seat next to the window, he closed his eyes and settled in for the flight. Of course, every time he did that, he saw Stavros. The man haunted him. Which was why Daniel tried to keep busy. Always on the go. If he sat still he'd fall into that trap, the one Stavros set for him.

The one where he relived every second they'd spent together and wished it were longer. Wished there were more. More touching.

He shifted in his seat.

Dios. He would not go away. He would not leave Daniel alone. He took up space. In his head. In his chest. Stavros took up space.

In the seat behind him, Toro's phone went off. "Mamá." He whispered to his mother then ended the call before tapping Daniel on the shoulder. "I need to go see my mother when we land."

"Is she okay?"

Toro nodded. "Sí." He sighed. "She had a doctor's appointment and she wants to discuss it."

"The cancer." Daniel sat up. "It's back?"

Toro shrugged, but Daniel saw the fear in the depths of his nephew's eyes. "She wants to tell me in person."

When Toro had been a teenager, Patricia had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She'd beaten it, but Daniel was aware that the disease sometimes returned. "I'll come with you." He hadn't seen Toro's mother in a long time, and the younger man could use the support.

"No. It's okay, I need to do this."

Daniel patted the top of Toro's head. "You'll let me know?"

"Sí."

"Take the time you need." He'd find something to occupy his time.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Shh." Stavros wiped away the tear as it slid down the quivering woman's cheek. "You did good." He smiled and she shrank back. That made him smile wider. "Very good."

"Don't kill me," she sobbed.

"Well, I make no promises," he told her. "It all depends on your son, really." A lock of her gray hair had escaped her loose bun so he twirled it around his finger before tucking it behind her ear.

"You-You're a friend of my Toro?" Tears shimmered in her eyes and when she blinked, it dropped, sliding once again down her cheek creased with age. She was a good-looking woman, plump and smelling like warmth and welcome.

"Friend is a strong word." He left it at that.

He'd barged into her modest house, just Bruce and him, over an hour ago. The rest of his men watched the exterior of the house, keeping a lookout for her son. He'd been surprised to find out that Daniel had a nephew. Toro wasn't officially a Nieto, but he had that crazy Nieto blood coursing through his veins.

That was the only requirement needed.

"You won't hurt him, will you?"

He liked her. Tied to one of her living room chairs, she still glared at him with fire in her wet eyes.

"Again," he told her. "It all depends on how cooperative your Toro turns out to be." He hadn't hurt her. They'd only scared her when she'd returned home. Bruce kept his balaclava on, Stavros choosing to show his face.

“Does your mamá know what you’re doing?”

He pulled up a chair and sat opposite her. “I didn’t have a mother,” he said while Bruce stood over in the corner, all silent and imposing. “She died giving birth to me.”

She watched him warily. “Is that why you’re doing this? Because you didn’t have a mother to teach you right from wrong?”

He barked a laugh. “Oh no. I just like doing this.”

“I’ll pray for your soul.”

He cocked his head. “I don’t have one, but I thank you all the same.” He touched his knuckles to her cheek. “I can see your love for your son,” he murmured. “I think I might be envious of it.”

Bruce’s phone went off and he shifted in the shadows. “He has arrived.”

“Come.” He peeled off a piece of the tape in his hand.

“No. No.” She twisted her side to side, but Bruce stepped forward, holding her steady so Stavros could tape her mouth.

She sobbed, the sound muffled by the tape.

“Shh.” He nodded to Bruce who bodily lifted her and carried her to the back room.

Keys jiggled in the lock then a second later a man in a black hooded sweatshirt and dark jeans entered.

“Mamá, I’m home.” He closed the door behind him.

“Hello, there.”

The newcomer spun, gun appearing in his hand. “Who are— Shit.” His eyes went wide when he spotted Stavros.

“Toro, yes?”

“Where’s my mother?” He lurched forward, grabbing Stavros by the front of his shirt. “Where is she?”

“Now. Now.” Stavros didn’t pull his weapon. He didn’t need it, not when he owned the upper hand. “Your mother—lovely woman, by the way—is somewhere close. Alive,” he said quickly. “But not if you decide to pull that trigger.”

Toro’s nostrils flared and he glared at Stavros. “I want to see her.”

“Em, nope.”

Toro swore and pushed Stavros away hard enough that he staggered. “What do you want?”

“You look like him, you know,” Stavros said softly. “It’s not too obvious, but in the eyes.” He touched a finger to the corner of his own left

eye. “You look like Daniel.”

Toro watched him as if he’d lost his mind. “Killing his wife wasn’t enough? You plan to kill another one of his family members?”

“Not sure if you notice, but we’re in something of a war, your uncle and I,” Stavros told him. “And it is expected there will be collateral damage.”

Toro scoffed. “You don’t really think you’ll win this, do you? You’re crazier than I thought if you do.”

“Depends on your definition of winning.” He winked. “Right now, I just need you to come with me.” The men from outside entered the room via the backdoor, and Toro’s jaw tightened when he spotted them.

“My mother—”

“Oh, don’t you worry.” He smiled just as one of the men plunged a needle into Toro’s neck. “She’s coming too.”

Didn’t take long to get from El Paso to Seattle. Not when you had your own jet and were on a mission. He rolled with a small crew and holed up in a hotel room making phone calls.

He couldn’t just drop in on the fly, he needed a plan. So he formulated one using the information at his disposal. It exhilarated him, got him high enough to fly. For the longest time he’d been living for his father, for Annika, for the business. Now that he’d handed over the day to day running to his uncle, he had more free time to do shit like poke at Daniel Nieto until the man erupted.

Stavros wanted to be on his knees to taste it.

“Are you sure about this?” his uncle asked when Stavros checked in on him.

“Naí.” *Yes.* “I am.” He sat in the back of the rented sedan driving to his destination with the phone at his ear, Bruce next to him with a possessive hand on Stavros’ thigh.

“It’s a line you can’t uncross,” Christophe pointed out. “You think you’ve made him angry before, but this…” He hesitated. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Stay at the penthouse, theíos. I’ve got this.” He hung up and stared out the window at the damp city. He’d stashed his uncle at his place. Stavros didn’t want blowback on his actions to land on Christophe. Which was fucked up considering what he’d done the past few days, and what he was on his way to do right this second.

But nobody ever said he wasn’t hypocritical as fuck.

“We’re here, sir.”

Stavros leaned forward. “You know the plan.” He got out, walked up to the building, and went inside.

It was a small office, with dark gray carpet and green walls. He scrunched his nose up at that. The woman behind the desk—African-American, with boxed braids pulled into a ponytail and thick red-framed glasses—glanced up as he strode in.

“Hello.” Her smile was big and toothy, and so damn bright he found himself returning it. “You have an appointment?”

“I do.” He glanced at the round-faced clock on the far wall. “And look at that, just on time.” He winked and she giggled, lashes fluttering. Women. Fuck, but he loved them.

Bruce walked past him and up to her desk, and from where he stood, Stavros watched the woman’s eyes widen just the tiniest bit.

“September, right?” he addressed her. “With a C?” She’d spelled it out for him over the phone earlier.

She nodded, gaze jumping from him to Bruce and back. Good girl, understanding where the threat really resided.

“September, I’m gonna need you to scream for me.”

Bruce brought the gun up, placed it gently at her temple, and she flinched backward with a scream. A nice, loud, hair-raising scream.

Her boss came running out of his office. “Sept—” He skidded to a halt, the blue folder in his hand dropping unnoticed to the floor. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Levi Nieto, I presume?” Stavros didn’t wait for him to answer, he went to the accountant staring at him with the angry eyes. Nieto eyes. “You move and she dies. You speak above a whisper, and she dies.”

To his credit, Levi stood his ground, and although he swallowed hard, his voice was steady when he spoke. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“I do.” Stavros went through Levi’s pockets, removing his phone and wallet. He placed them on September’s desk. “I’m Stavros Konstantinou, and your brother and I, we’ve got unfinished business.”

By the ticking in his jaw, Levi recognized Stavros’ name. “Shouldn’t you be taking that up with him?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He picked up Levi’s phone and handed it to September. “Please call Donovan Cintron, tell him Stavros has his husband.

Let’s go.” He motioned for Levi to precede him out the door, but the other man didn’t move.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Well, that’s fucking selfish. I could have killed you, Levi. And your son. And that crazy husband of yours. But I’m simply borrowing you. So please…” He pointed to the door again. “Start walking, otherwise Bruce here will start shooting, and he won’t stop at the gorgeous September.” He winked at the receptionist whose stare remained on him.

She tore her gaze away, and he chuckled.

“Daniel will kill you.” Levi’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t even know what Van will do to you.”

“You let me handle your brother, and as far as your husband, I’m sure I know some ways to neutralize him.” He pushed Levi between the shoulder blades, propelling him to the door. The younger man went, grudgingly.

If only all of Stavros’ kidnappings went as smoothly as this.

“Make the call, September,” he called over his shoulder. They exited the building without incident, and he had Levi in the back seat of the vehicle in no time. “Let’s go.”

“You killed my brother’s wife.” Levi watched him closely, as though searching for something.

“I did.” He nodded.

“Are you proud of it, what you did? You destroyed him.”

“It was a job. I did a job. It wasn’t personal.”

“Maybe not then,” Levi said. “But now you’re deliberately making it personal.” He cocked his head. “Why?”

“I sent somebody to kill your husband once,” Stavros said instead.

Levi blanched.

“Obviously good help remains hard to find, since Donovan is still alive.” He touched Levi’s chin. “You want something done correctly, you do it yourself. Am I right?”

“You could just tell him,” Levi murmured.

Stavros stared at him blankly.

“You could just tell him how you feel.”

He ignored that. Worst advice ever.

They remained silent on the rest of the drive to the hotel, and once they were in Stavros’ room, he instructed the men, “Everyone leave. Bruce stays.”

“But, sir—”

“Not up for debate.” He crooked his finger at Levi who’d taken a seat on one of the loveseats. He didn’t look too worried. Maybe if he had a cartel kingpin for a brother and a former FBI agent with dubious morals for a husband, Stavros would feel the same way, too. “This way, please.”

He directed Levi to the adjoining door, connecting with the next room. He’d reserved the entire hotel floor, just to be on the safe side. In the room next door, Toro and his mother sat, hands and feet tied with rope, tapes over their mouth and dark hoods over their heads.

Levi stopped short when he spied them. “What the fuck?” He spun, glaring at Stavros who shrugged.

“You’re not my only captive.” He shoved the incredulous man into a chair. “I’m gonna tie you up now.”

And he did, while Levi watched with an open mouth. Good for him that he didn’t fight. Stavros didn’t want to actually hurt him. Once the ropes around Levi’s wrist and ankles were secure, Stavros stood.

“There, now you can get to know your nephew a little bit better.”

Levi’s eyes bulged. “What?” He jerked his head to the two hooded figures next to him. “Nephew?”

“Oh, forgive me.” He yanked the hood off Toro’s head, and the youngest Nieto blinked rapidly before glaring up at him. “Toro, meet Levi, your uncle. Levi, this is Toro, Antonio Nieto’s bastard son.” He left the room while the men gaped at each other.

Bruce waited for him, concern etched on his pale face. “Are you ready for this?”

Fuck, he’d been ready since the first step he took outside the room Daniel kept him in. “Yes.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"How is she?"

He stared out the plane's window into darkness, phone to his ear as he asked the question.

The caregiver sighed before answering. "The past few days have been pretty tough, sir. Her mobility has decreased substantially. Getting her to rest—" She cleared her throat. "It's easier when you're around."

"I know." He did, and staying away when she needed him felt foreign. That action went against every instinct in him. "My business will keep me away for the foreseeable future, but I am a phone call away if anything changes."

"I know that, sir. We can handle it."

"Gracias, Charlie." He ended the call, and closed his fist around the phone.

Being there with her, taking care of her, sometimes felt like home. And other times, it felt very much like a prison. Someplace he couldn't wait to escape.

Funny thing was, he wanted a home again. His life would never be same as before, how could it be? But he wanted a home, all the same. How could he have one? She'd be gone soon. The illness would eventually win, and she'd leave Daniel behind.

Petra gone.

Antonio gone.

The one thing he'd always had, he no longer did. Family. Home. He was a creature of habit. Never straying too far from what he knew and loved.

Right now, he was on the plane headed for New York. Because he was comfortable there. Because the house in Brooklyn was the closest he had to stable. It was the house where he'd kept Stavros. He slept in the bed Stavros once slept in.

Those moments.

He couldn't forget it. Every word, every breath, every touch, he relived.

The kiss.

He rubbed the middle of his chest. It was supposed to fade. But if anything the craving was getting worse. He'd stopped waiting for it to make any sense.

Fact was, he was attracted to Stavros Konstantinou, and it wasn't going away.

His phone went off, and he glanced down at the device he clutched in his palm. "Levi," he answered with a smile.

"Stavros has Levi," Van blurted into his ear.

Daniel lurched upright. "What?" He didn't just hear—

"That unhinged son of a bitch has Levi," Van yelled. "He took him from his office, just marched him out the door with a gun at his back."

"Tell me what happened." Stavros had Levi. He wanted to die, he had to know how Daniel would react. He had to know—

Round two.

His belly tightened. "Do you know where he took him?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be on the phone with you," Van growled. "He wants you, and he's using Levi to get you. You realize this, right?"

"I am aware." He squeezed his eyes shut briefly. "I have to make a call. I will call you back."

"Hurry the fuck up," Van barked. "I'm not good with sitting on my hands. Especially not now."

"Sit tight." Daniel hung up and dialed Toro. The phone rang twice.

"Hello there."

Stavros' voice settled causally in Daniel's gut, heating him up instantly. "You have Toro's phone?"

"Noticed that, did you?"

"Where is he?"

"Unavailable. Next question."

"Are they hurt?" he asked. "That is my family, and if you hurt them… You must know how this will end."

“The Riverton Hotel. Twentieth floor. Room two.” The cool smoothness in his voice gripped Daniel.

His body responded to just that, hardening despite the circumstances. “You have my attention,” he murmured. “That is what you wanted, yes? But you must know, Stavros…”

Stavros inhaled.

“You must know you had it from the very beginning. You never lost my attention.”

“Five hours. You for them.”

His body liked every single thing about this. Daniel dug his fingers into his seat, gripping hard. “I’m on my way.” The call disconnected and the sensation of loss was swift.

He fisted the phone and pressed his knuckles to his mouth. “Dios.” He waited until he could breathe normally again before calling Van.

“Talk to me.”

“He wants to do a swap. I have it under control.”

“Make fucking sure you do. I’m not playing this sick game with that bastard.”

But that sick game? Daniel wanted to play it.

He arrived in Seattle in just under five hours, and by the time he made his way through the hotel’s busy lobby and up to the twentieth floor, he had mere seconds to spare. He’d met up with Van downstairs, forcing Levi’s husband to wait, and not do anything.

He suspected it was one of the hardest things Van had to do, and Daniel understood. But this was his fight, and Levi and Toro were already caught up in it. He couldn’t let things escalate for the people he cared about.

The truth of Levi’s identity was known to only a small few, so he had to question how Stavros knew about Levi and Toro’s connection to Daniel. He’d be sure to ask when he saw his former captive.

In front of door number two on the twentieth floor, Daniel paused, fist resting against the door. His belly was in knots. He’d felt like this only once before.

With Petra.

The truth of it made him grunt. No escaping this. He took a deep breath. Knocked once, and the door opened for him.

He stepped inside, and was immediately shoved into the wall. Quick hands patted him down, removing the gun in his waist, and the knives in his

boot. He didn’t speak, and he kept still, eyes glued to the white wall.

He didn’t hear Stavros, but Daniel felt him.

Close by. Stavros had to be close because the hairs on Daniel’s body were already standing on end as though pulled by magnets. The men yanked him around, and Daniel found himself facing the opulent hotel room.

Stavros stood at the windows, his back to the room.

Dios. Daniel stared at him, the dark hair brushing his collar, the white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing his forearms covered in dark hair. He was everything Daniel remembered, and more. Tall and built, powerful standing there in the silence, against the sheer drapes at the windows.

“Bruce,” Stavros spoke without turning around. “Please accompany our visitor next door.”

Before he finished speaking, a gun was at Daniel’s head. Bruce—he remembered everything about Bruce—waved a hand, and Daniel started walking. He bided his time, until he knew Toro and Levi were safe, then he and Stavros would talk.

He fisted his hands. All the things Stavros did to get Daniel here and now he wouldn’t even turn around to look him in the eye? They definitely had to talk.

Bruce opened an adjoining room, and motioned Daniel inside. He rolled his eyes and stepped over the threshold. He stopped short when he spotted the three figures, hands tied behind their backs, tapes over their mouth.

Damn it.

Levi spotted him first, and his eyes went wide. Daniel reached him in two strides and ripped the tape off. Levi winched.

“Fuck! That hurt.”

“Are you all right?” He turned to Bruce who just stood there, gun in hand. “I kept up my end of the bargain. Untie them.”

Bruce just stared at him.

“Untie them, Bruce,” Stavros’ voice came from the other room. “The man is right. He did keep up his end of the bargain.” He was cool. This Stavros was the one Daniel got to know first. The one he’d watched from the shadows.

He’d never dealt with this Stavros before though.

He looked forward to it, but first…

With everybody untied, Levi jumped to his feet, grimacing as he rubbed his chafed wrist. “What the fuck, Daniel?”

“Lo siento. I—”

“Tío.” Toro walked over, jaw set. “Is it true?” He jerked a thumb toward Levi. “He is family?”

“He is.” Daniel nodded. “But now is not the time for explanations.” He turned to Toro’s mother, taking both her hand in his. “How are you, Patricia?”

She slapped him, eyes flashing her familiar contempt. “You put my son in danger,” she snapped. “Again.”

“Mamá.”

Daniel smiled, ignoring his stinging cheek. “You look beautiful,” he told her. “As always.”

She rolled her eyes. “Get me out of here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He motioned to Levi and Toro. “Go.”

Toro narrowed his eyes. “And you?”

“I have business with Mr. Konstantinou.”

“Jefe, I don’t think—”

“Take your mother and get out of here, Toro. Let me handle this. It’s an order.” He turned to Levi. “Van is downstairs. I had to threaten to shoot him to keep him from coming with me.”

Levi pursed his lips. “How is he?”

“Worried about you.” Daniel threw an arm around Levi’s shoulder and guided him away from Toro and Patricia. “I’m sorry about this.”

“What are you going to do?”

He had no clue, so Daniel simply shrugged.

Levi watched him closely. “He doesn’t hate you, you know.”

Daniel didn’t know anything anymore, not when it came to Stavros.

“I don’t think you hate him either.”

“I don’t know what I feel, hermanito.”

“Don’t you?” Levi’s lips curved. He looked the most like their mother. Her eyes, the oval shape of her face. “I think you know how you both feel, and you’re afraid.” He nodded toward the door. “You and him.”

He wasn’t dignifying that with a response. Mostly because he didn’t have one. “Go. They won’t touch you.” He hugged Levi, pressed a kiss to his temple. “I can handle him.”

Levi searched his face before finally nodding. “Okay, but we’re going to talk about you not telling me I have a nephew.”

“Sí.”

He walked away, and Toro approached Daniel. “Tío, are you sure about this?” He cocked his head. “What is going on here, really?”

How could Daniel explain when he didn’t fully understand it himself? “Take care of your mother,” he told Toro. “I’ll contact you soon.”

“But…”

“Go.”

His nephew went, but with great reluctance. Daniel stood in the middle of the room, hands at his sides, as Levi, Toro and Patricia exited the room. When the door closed behind him, he realized fully what he’d done.

He had weaknesses again.

He had somethings, so many somethings to lose again, and he hadn’t even realized it until now. When silence greeted him, he made his way to the room next door. The one where Stavros waited.

He remained at the window, arms spread wide as he gripped the railing. His bodyguards had all disappeared. No guns, nothing but them.

“Stavros.” If he sounded unsure, if he sounded lost, if he sounded as unsettled as he felt, Daniel didn’t care.

Stavros turned away from the window. His face was a smooth façade, devoid of anything resembling an expression. But just the sight of him sent Daniel’s senses reeling.

“You for them.”

“Sí.” If he’d doubted it before, there was no denying it this time. Heat pooled in his groin, and his belly tightened with each step Stavros took toward him. He felt awake, after a long time asleep. Alive, after such a long time in that grave with Petra.

Thinking of her cooled him down some, until Stavros touched him. A palm to Daniel’s cheek. He trembled under that touch. So simple, yet so not. The prelude to more.

He wanted more, so he leaned into Stavros’ palm.

“Goddamn it.” As Daniel watched, Stavros’ mask crumpled. “It’s still there.” He grabbed Daniel by the throat, yanking him closer. “It’s still there. You’re still there.”

Daniel didn’t ask him what “it” was. He already knew. “Stav—”

Mouth on him, desperate and wet. An attack Daniel accepted, wrapping his arms around Stavros, hugging him close, and opening for him. Biting back, pushing forward into hardness. Into Stavros, who tasted just like Daniel remembered.

Dangerous. Intoxicating.

Fingers in Daniel's hair gripped him tight, held him still, as Stavros led. And Daniel followed. Only too happy to give up, give in, and let Stavros take what Daniel had wanted to hand over for so very long.

Something bad couldn't taste this good. Something bad couldn't weaken his knees and harden him to stone. Something bad couldn't feel this right, Stavros in his arms, in his mouth, melting like the best kind of confection on his tongue.

The kiss was full on violent, breath-snatching. Nothing Daniel ever felt before. Nothing he'd ever get from someone else. Only from Stavros.

Only Stavros.

He consumed, and Daniel didn't mind. He didn't care. He let it happen: the one hand gripping his hair, the tongue stripping him naked, and the other hand sliding down his torso to cup his erection.

He groaned into Stavros' mouth and bucked into his hand.

Feeling.

Years since he'd been touched. He didn't think he'd ever want it again. But he did. He wanted Stavros' touch. He trembled for it. His mouth watered for it. That it was a man making him feel like this no longer surprised him.

That it was Stavros Konstantinou kept him in a state of wonder and incredulity. But none of it stopped him from placing his own palm over Stavros' at his groin and squeezing. It didn't stop him from chasing those wet lips when Stavros tried to pull back, from catching them and sinking his teeth in, keeping him there.

Keeping him close.

On Daniel's tongue.

Inside him.

In this moment he'd give anything, everything he had, to keep Stavros' hands on him. To keep their lips as fused as they were. He didn't hurt as much when Stavros touched him. He didn't ache so badly. The hollow inside him didn't seem so endless and all-consuming. The loneliness that

battered him and bowed his shoulders retreated, taking the overpowering darkness with it.

Twice in one lifetime.

How could he walk away?

How could he let it go?

Stavros lifted away slowly, their lips making a wet sound when they parted. Daniel opened his eyes and found Stavros watching him. His usually cold eyes now blazed like the hottest inferno.

Their gazes locked.

“I get in the same fucking room with you, and I catch afire.” The words rumbled from Stavros as he stroked Daniel’s jaw. “I underestimated the danger you bring.”

“Diablo—” He lifted a hand, but something pricked his neck. Words tangled all over each other in his throat, and he gurgled, vision dimming. His body locked down and he blinked at Stavros, at his gray eyes, cold and piercing.

One second they were eye to eye and the next, Daniel found himself gazing up. He’d crumpled to his knees. The pounding of his heart, along with the sound of blood rushing through his veins, deafened him. Stavros stood right there, not even an inch away, but Daniel couldn’t make his hand cooperate to reach out, to touch his knee.

Stroke his leg.

Which was something he ached to do suddenly.

Stavros didn’t move, but something dropped suddenly around Daniel’s neck. Rope, looped in the shape of a noose that bit into his windpipe, cutting off his breathing. A sharp tug dropped him backward, and Stavros moved then, legs planted on either side of Daniel’s twitching body.

He was going to die, he understood and accepted that. Still, he regretted not getting to kiss Stavros Konstantinou again. And as his vision blinked out, he wondered what he’d say to his wife when they finally met on the other side.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Stavros paced the hotel room, bourbon in one hand, gun in the other.

In the next room, Daniel Nieto was strapped to his bed, naked.

"Fuck." He pressed his forehead to the cool window, hoping it would cool him down, but nothing worked for him. He'd drugged Daniel and had Bruce help carry him to the bed. Stavros had been the only one to undress him, to see his lean body covered from chest down various scars, healed bullet wounds, and his wife's name.

The sight of him. Stavros couldn't stop staring, wanting to touch. To taste.

Fascinating.

Why that man?

He spun away from the window and resumed pacing. The drug he'd injected Daniel with should be wearing off soon. Stavros wanted him awake. Wanted his deadly eyes open and on him for this one.

When Daniel entered the room earlier, Stavros had deliberately kept himself from looking at him. Daniel made him weak in the knees, and he'd needed his strength to stand. To do what needed to be done. But he'd made the mistake of touching Daniel.

Of kissing him.

That connection he felt hadn't gone away. Had Daniel felt it, too? How could he not? How could he not come away covered in ash from the shit that burned when they touched? He'd never felt like this, and Stavros didn't like it.

Daniel turned him into a needy mess, but he wanted it. Wanted him. Get him out of his system. Daniel needed to go if Stavros wanted to go back to who he used to be.

He tossed back the last of the bourbon, and threw the glass at the cold fireplace. The shattering sound was less than satisfying. Nothing else would satisfy him.

He padded to the bedroom on bare feet, and stood with his arms folded in the doorway, watching the naked man on the bed.

The rope remained around Daniel's neck, but the ends were secured around the headboard. His arms were also shackled to the headboard with handcuffs, so he was spread out for Stavros in the middle of that huge bed, naked and inviting,

Not vulnerable though. Even now, as he lay there with his eyes closed and his mouth taped shut, Daniel Nieto would never be vulnerable.

He didn't have to come alone, not with the men he had at his beck and call. Taking Levi Nieto meant Stavros would incur Donovan Cintron's wrath. He accepted that, and he'd fully expected the ex FBI agent to come in guns blazing to rescue his husband. He hadn't, which meant Daniel had talked him out of it.

He'd put himself on the line, exposing yet another weakness.

Family.

Daniel Nieto valued his family like no man Stavros had ever seen.

As he watched, Daniel's eyes flew open, zeroing in on him.

"Not too long ago our positions were reversed," Stavros said softly. Daniel's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I could retaliate the way everyone expects me to, but violence doesn't work for me anymore. Not with you."

He stripped slowly, holding Daniel's gaze. First the shirt then his belt. He tossed them aside then tugged his pants and underwear down, over his erection growing harder by the second, and stepped out of them.

Daniel never looked away, and though his throat worked, he didn't speak. Not that he could, what with the tape over his mouth. But his cock, long and thick, and fucking curved just right, jerked against his belly.

Stavros licked his lips. He got on the bed and straddled Daniel, ass resting atop his belly as he stroked a hand down Daniel's torso. The other man stiffened all over. "The last time, you were on top." Against his ass, Daniel's cock jerked.

Stavros smiled then sobered quickly.

“I thought it would go away,” he said softly. “I thought it was temporary insanity, something happening because of forced circumstance.” He brushed his lips over Daniel’s nose. The other man’s breath hitched. “I wanted you gone from my head, and your touch removed from my body.” He leaned backward, sitting upright as he touched himself, a hand down his chest. “No matter who touches me, it’s never quite the same.”

Daniel’s nostrils flared and he growled.

Stavros kissed him, an openmouthed caress in the hollow of his throat. Daniel’s scent surrounded him, warm skin and deep, drugging lust. Stavros wanted to release him, take away the rope and the handcuffs so those rough hands could destroy him all over again.

But he didn’t.

Instead he kept on kissing Daniel, licking his skin, tongue dragging over the words on his torso. Her name. Felt as if Stavros was kissing her too. Tasting her too.

She tasted like that familiar guilt, bitter-sweet.

But he didn’t stop, even when Daniel arched under his tongue, sound rumbling in his chest under Stavros’ touch while the handcuffs rattled in the background.

He didn’t stop.

He went lower.

Lower.

Breathing on that erection, the crown wet and flushed, jerking against Daniel’s lower belly. Stavros licked his lips and took a deep breath, bringing Daniel’s musk into his lungs.

Fuck.

The scent of a man. This man. He ached from head to toe. He ached. He craved.

So he parted his lips and took Daniel into his mouth.

“Nngh!” Daniel’s hips jerked off the bed, forcing him deeper into Stavros’ mouth.

Eyes closed, Stavros clung to the sheets, fisting them as he sank deeper, the non-existent gag-reflex allowing him to throat all that thickness. Daniel throbbed for him, spilling liquid secrets that burst across his taste buds and sent him groaning.

Shuddering.

He shoved a hand down between his own legs, fisting his cock, stroking, hips rolling, slamming into his grasp as he drank Daniel down. Already he wanted more. He wasn't finished and already Stavros wanted to do this all over again.

For once, he tried for selfless. For once, he gave, forgetting to take. Saliva flowing, one hand gripping the base of Daniel's cock, Stavros sucked him down. And Daniel fucked his face, hips slamming forward, forcing his length all the way in, choking Stavros.

Eyes watering.

Breath stuttering.

He took the face-fuck that rocked his head back with every thrust. Rattling his teeth. Pain and pleasure.

Punishment too.

He kept his eyes shut against the emotions that rode him. Guarding himself against that look in Daniel's eyes. The one he couldn't decipher. And he blocked out the name that danced in front of his eyes.

Her name.

He did all that with a cock in his mouth, and his dick wrapped up in his fist. Hungry, yes. Starved, yes. Panting, jaw aching, throat burning. But he didn't stop except long enough to gulp air into his lungs before he dove in again.

Sucking the crown, tongue sliding up and down before he dipped lower, following that thick vein on the underside with the tip of his tongue. All the way to the base, where he sucked Daniel's balls into his mouth.

One at a time.

Daniel writhed for him, thighs vibrating. Growls and groans blocked by the tape on his mouth. He didn't shy away from Stavros' touch, though. He parted his thighs, arching.

Offering.

Greedy bastard that he was, Stavros took. Licking him until he was wet.

Soaked.

That hole back there? Stavros put his mouth over it. Put his tongue on it. All over it while Daniel lurched upright then pressed tight against the mattress, trying to escape.

Nowhere to go.

"I'm gonna eat you. The fuck. Alive." Stavros grabbed him by the hip, pushed one leg backward.

And fucking dined.

Tongue and finger pushed in. In return Daniel gave him those hoarse, shredded sounds. Against Stavros's palm, his thigh trembled badly. Stavros ignored him, loving the way Daniel's body clenched around him.

He'd never been touched like this, Stavros knew that. He wasn't sure if he was trying to make it good for Daniel or not. He just wanted to make him feel. Wanted to make sure he knew.

This was who they were now.

So he tongue-fucked that hole, got it nice and wet, until his fingers were slipping and sliding. Until Daniel was rocking back on his face, pushing back on his finger. Then Stavros backed away, and straddled him again.

He met Daniel's eyes then. Wide and glassy, color high on his cheeks, he yanked violently on the handcuffs. Stavros closed his fist around his cock and stroked, hard and fast. Daniel watched, nostrils flared wide, whatever he was trying to say muffled by the tape. His body jerked, hips lifting off the bed.

"I'm looking at you," Stavros whispered. "And I can barely breathe." He tightened his grip on himself, anger rising, getting all twisted up in the lust and the arousal. "Tell me you're not feeling the same." He gripped Daniel's face, nails digging into his skin. "I want the truth you speak only to yourself when you're alone in the dark, with your hand on your cock and my name on your lips."

He cupped his balls, tugging, rolling his hips, shuddering, lashes threatening to fall closed. "That's the truth I want. The one that says you want this." He stopped stroking his cock, and brought that hand to his mouth, licking off the pre-cum. Then he held that same hand up to Daniel's nose. "Give me the truth that says you need this, you crave it like I do."

Daniel grunted, yanking harder on the handcuffs. Stavros ignored him, fucking his fist, thrusting into his hand, holding Daniel's gaze, pinching his own nipples. Tugging. Moaning.

Daniel's eyes flashed. So hot, Stavros was immediately sweating. The tiny droplets slid down the length of his spine.

"Tell me you don't want me." His thighs burned and vibrated and under him, Daniel trembled, hips once again lifting off the bed. Stavros reached behind and grasped Daniel's shaft. "Say that you don't need me."

"Unggg." He pleaded with his eyes.

As much as Stavros wanted his words, he found he was too afraid of hearing them, so he made no move to remove the tape. Instead, he brought Daniel's cock to his hole, rubbing against it, breath hitching, stomach contracting.

He was hot everywhere.

Movements faltering.

Shaking.

He wanted to punish them both, but he felt as if he was the only one losing his mind. Losing himself.

"I want you to fuck me," he snarled at Daniel, pushing back until the head of his shaft was firmly against his hole. "Then I want you gone." He raked his fingers over Daniel's belly, and sound gurgled in the other man's throat as his belly contracted. "Get inside me so I can get you out of my system."

He didn't know who he was anymore. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, who he was supposed to be. How did he get it to go away? How did he escape this?

He picked up the lube he'd brought with him. He had planned this, after all. He lubed himself, fingers pushing into his hole, twisting, stretching himself. Since they left New York over a week ago, he hadn't slept with Bruce.

Or anyone for that matter. He'd been waiting for this.

Still, Daniel simply regarded him with eyes gone black with lust. His pupils were dilated, nostrils flared, even his cheek was touched with color.

He uttered those sounds in the back of his throat, hoarse grunts that made Stavros' blood boil. When he was all slick, he put a condom on Daniel's shaft, stroking him before bringing him back to his entrance.

Stavros lifted up.

Then he sank down.

Daniel's eyes bulged wide, and he went crazy, yanking at the handcuffs.

Fuck. He felt huge. Stavros groaned, still jerking himself off. "Fuck. Fuck." He bowed his head. "Oh God." He stroked himself furiously as he sank all the way down.

When Daniel bottomed out, they both flinched.

Stavros lifted up again. Then he dropped down.

He couldn't breathe. Daniel's hips were moving, thrusting up, circling. Hitting his spot that quick.

Jesus. Christ.

He had no speech then, just plaintive groans, his head falling backward as he slammed up before lifting up and doing it again.

Over and over. Daniel wasn't even pretending anymore. He fucked Stavros, pounding up into him with eyes narrowed to slits. He felt amazing. Crazy hot. So thick, hitting Stavros where he needed him. Until he was grunting loud and hungry, pulling on his dick, shuddering.

Coming. He spilled in his fist, ass contracting.

Warmth teased his sensitive hole, and he pitched forward, clawing at Daniel's chest, fingers scratching at that name as he shivered. Flashing hot.

Then cold.

Back to hot.

He reached forward and yanked off the tape over Daniel's mouth. Then he smeared his cum-streaked fingers over Daniel's lips and chin. When the other man's lips parted, Stavros rammed his fingers into his mouth.

All the way in, hooking it at the back of his throat.

So Daniel could taste him.

Also, to shut him up before he even began denying them.

God. Damn. It. Stavros wasn't fucking done. "Now you can say you didn't have a choice." He made himself lift off Daniel. That loss. *Fuck.* He stifled a moan. "You can stay loyal to her," he whispered. "While you continue to blame me for what you're wanting. What you're needing." Forehead pressed to Daniel's, Stavros told him, "Put it all on me—" His voice cracked. "I'll take the blame for the both of us." It was the least he could do. The only thing he could do.

Because there was no way he could stop wanting Daniel.

And there was no way he could erase what he'd done. Then and now.

"Stavros." His voice, so rough slid over Stavros' newly exposed nerves and made him shudder.

He turned away, headed to the bathroom.

"Diablo, stop."

But he couldn't. Stavros escaped into the bathroom and stepped into the shower. Things were supposed to go differently. He'd get fucked and purged. Daniel would be out of his system, and he could go back to the unfeeling son of a bitch he'd always been. Except he hadn't even stopped spasming from the orgasm, and he already wanted more. He hadn't even come close to being satiated.

He wanted more.

He bowed his head under the shower spray. He was fucked up, well and truly fucked up. They had to put an end to it. He couldn’t go on like this, not with someone like Daniel Nieto.

He washed his body on autopilot, with shaking hands and a throat that burned every time he swallowed. And when he got out the shower and walked back into the bedroom, the headboard was splintered into three pieces, and the bed was empty.

Shit.

He spun in a circle, searching for any sign of a threat. But he already knew, Daniel was gone. How in the hell did he escape? He left the handcuffs behind, but the rope was nowhere to be seen. A dent in the mattress, and the imprint of his head on the pillow was the only proof that Daniel had been there. The room felt still and cold, almost as if Stavros had imagined the heat Daniel emitted.

He climbed onto the bed and settled into the spot Daniel had recently occupied. Still warm. He buried his face in pillows that smelled of Daniel and them.

Sex.

It was sex. And it was done. He hated him for it, but Daniel did what Stavros couldn’t.

He walked away.

Leaving Stavros scrambling to find the missing pieces of who he used to be.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

2:23 in the morning, but Daniel hit dial anyway.

"Daniel?"

He closed his eyes at the immediate worry in Levi's sleepy voice. "How are you?"

"Shit, forget me." Murmured voices and rustling clothes echoed in the background. "How are you?"

He chuckled darkly. "I am thinking forty-nine is very late for me to discover my bisexuality."

"It's never too late," his brother said softly. "Some people go to their graves not knowing who they are."

Of course. He knew that. "I'm sorry you got caught up between Stavros and me, and I'm sorry for waking you."

"You can call me any time," Levi assured him. "Van's still kinda pissy so uh, we haven't been to bed yet." He cleared his throat then said, "That Stavros, you've got dude's head all fucked up. You know that, right?"

"He does the same to me."

"But you like it." When Daniel didn't answer, Levi chuckled. "Yeah, I know. I married one of those. The sex alone almost makes up for everything else, but you can't build something on a hate-fuck alone." He paused. "Do you want to build something?"

"I don't know." Daniel put his head back on the car seat. Headed to the airport. Running, too. From what just happened in that hotel room behind him. He didn't think about it. Couldn't think about it yet. "I touch him and nothing else matters, but that never lasts."

“And you remember you’re fucking the man who killed your wife.”

“It is crazy.”

“Yeah, it is. But he’s a crazy dude, and from what the news says, you’re off your rocker. So…”

“Te amo, hermanito. Gracias.”

“Later.”

He ended the call and blew out a breath. Lots he had to figure out, and he couldn’t do it in Stavros’ bed. He fingered the rope in his lap. He should have tossed it in the trash, but for some reason he held on to it. His shoulders throbbed from all the twisting and slamming he’d done to break the headboard. He’d feel it for a few days, but it was a small price to pay.

He had to get away. Not away from Stavros, because that was an impossibility. The magnitude of it all crashed down on him, and he needed to think. Clear his head, and come to grips with what was happening.

I’ll take the blame for the both of us.

But it wasn’t on Stavros to make Daniel’s betrayal an easier weight to carry. It wasn’t on Stavros’ shoulders to make Daniel feel better that he hadn’t been a full participant in what just happened. From their first kiss, he’d never not been fully engaged and completely aware of his actions. His mind, his body had been fully on board.

He didn’t need an excuse. The truth worked just fine.

He wanted it.

Wanted more, and next time he’d take more.

Because there would be a next time.

“What’s the emergency?” Stavros strode into his uncle’s office without knocking. “I need to—” He stopped short at the sight that greeted him.

His uncle sat at his desk, flanked on either side by two men with guns pointed at his temple. Before Stavros could do more than blink, a weapon was pressed to his side.

“Fuck.”

He glanced to his left and cursed again. This time silently.

Felipe Guzmán stood with his hands in his pockets. Felipe, the leader of The Ghost Gang. Daniel Nieto’s rival.

And brother-in-law.

“Mr. Konstantinou, welcome.” That name didn’t send Stavros’ pulse into overdrive like it did when Daniel used it. “We have business to discuss.”

“Do we?” Stavros held his gaze. “Get your men away from my uncle.”

Felipe smiled, looking like the boy next door with that round face and those fat cheeks. He was a few inches shorter than Stavros, made all the more clear when he strode over and stood directly in front of Stavros. “I think not.”

Stavros sighed. He wasn’t up to doing this right now. He didn’t get any sleep the night before, and he spent the entire plane ride figuring out a way to reclaim his sanity. He wasn’t up for ten rounds with this crazy fucker right now. Still, he shrugged as one of Felipe’s men patted him down, taking away his weapon and phone, and tossing them aside.

“What business do we have?” As if he didn’t know, right?

“You killed mi hermana.”

“Did I?”

Felipe cocked his head. “You did.” Hands in his pockets, he regarded Stavros closely. “I’m owed a debt, Mr. Konstantinou, but I’m willing to let it go.”

Sure. “What do you want?”

A wide smile creased Felipe’s face, but never made it to his cold eyes. “Nothing too difficult. I simply want you to finish what you started.”

“Meaning what?”

“Daniel Nieto has resurfaced from whatever hole he’d crawled into.” Hate practically dripped from every word Felipe spoke. “You were to finish him off that night you took my sister away.” His eyes glinted. “Kill him now.”

“I don’t work for you,” Stavros told him. “If Nieto has resurfaced, I’ll deal with him in my own way. In my own time.”

Felipe chuckled. “You mistake me, Mr. Konstantinou.” He shuffled closer, hands still his pockets. “You kill for profit, is that not what you do? Is that not the reason mi mamá is without her firstborn daughter right now? I could take revenge into my own hands, but I’m giving you a chance to fix what you broke. To set right everything you did wrong.” His voice didn’t go higher, but Stavros recognized danger when he saw it. “Despite money not changing hands, this is in every way a business transaction. You take care of

my brother-in-law, and I don’t lay waste to you and your tío over there.” He nodded in Christophe’s direction.

Stavros barely refrained from rolling his eyes. He removed a cigarette and lighter from his jacket pocket without taking his eyes off Felipe. He’d been threatened by men way deadlier than Felipe Guzmán, and lived to tell the tale. The wannabe kingpin didn’t rattle him, not even the tiniest bit—especially not after having spent that bit of time in Daniel’s dungeon. “The fastest way to lose me is to threaten me.” He took a drag of the lit cigarette then blew out the smoke into Felipe’s face. “I don’t respond well to those.”

“I’d rethink that, if I were you.” Felipe watched him silently for a while. “Let me know when it’s done.” He left the office, his men trailing after him.

“What the hell was that?” Stavros glared at his uncle. “You couldn’t give me some kind of warning?”

Christophe shrugged. “They ambushed me and took away my phone.” He walked over to Stavros. “What are you going to do? And I thought you’d quit that shit?” He nodded at the cigarette.

Stavros snorted. He did quit, but he was thinking that had been a huge mistake. He’d been making a lot of those lately. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

Alarm widened his uncle’s eyes. “The correct answer would have been, he’ll be dead by sundown.” His jaw dropped and he stepped back. “You feel for him.”

They didn’t have to speak Daniel’s name for him to be in the room with them. Still, Stavros shook his head. “No.” He couldn’t. That would be impossible because he was heartless, and soulless, and he didn’t feel things for anybody except lust.

“Anipsiós.” *Nephew.* Christophe sighed. He always knew when Stavros was up to something. When he was lying, pretending, stalling. Like now. “What did you do in Seattle?”

His uncle was the man Stavros always wanted his father to be. The brothers looked so much alike, they’d occasionally be mistaken for twins. But with two years between Christophe and Haimon, looks were the only thing they had in common. Head still full of hair, now with more gray than black, Christophe was as tall as Stavros, body lean from his love of swimming. The lines on his face were earned from smiling, light blue eyes always twinkling even when he scolded.

Almost seventy, and he was still as spry as he'd been when Stavros was a boy.

"I have to go." Stavros turned toward the door, but Christophe grabbed his arm.

"Stavros." His tone scolded, much like when Stavros had been a teenager all those eons ago. "What did you do?"

"I fucked up," he snarled. "Last night was—" He pulled away from Christophe's hold, twisting around to meet the older man's worried gaze. "Theíos," his voice dropped to something barely above a whisper. "I'm in trouble."

The last time he'd acknowledged that fact, he'd been twenty-one and filled with lust for his stepsister. Christophe had talked sense into him, helping him see how much of a bad idea it was. His uncle remained close to make sure Stavros didn't ever go too far off the tracks. But this…

This.

"My boy." Christophe pulled him into a hug, slapping his back. "Yes, you are."

Nothing else to say. Christophe couldn't help him this time around. Unlike the Annika situation, Stavros couldn't hop on a plane to another continent to hide. That cowardice wouldn't work twice.

Strange how he alternated between feeling freer than he'd ever been yet trapped by the connection between him and Daniel. Both sensations made him panic.

He went back to his place, dismissing Bruce who could never quite take the hint that Stavros wanted to be alone. He needed to think, needed to figure out a way to deal with Felipe Guzmán, and with himself. Because he was starting to feel things.

Like regret.

Like sorrow.

Like that thing he refused to name, the thing that came over him when Daniel Nieto looked at him. Touched him. Kissed him.

There weren't many things he'd done in his life that he wished to do over. His father told him once that a man needed to be able to do introspection on himself. A man needed to be willing to face his actions and stand by them, good or bad. He needed to take responsibility, and be held accountable.

He wished he hadn’t taken that job. Petra Nieto might still be alive. Daniel Nieto might not be as fucked up as he was. If he asked for it, would Daniel forgive him? As conflicted as Stavros was, Daniel obviously fought an even bigger war inside himself.

Last night, Stavros gave him an excuse. He took away Daniel’s choice, made it so all the blame would be on Stavros. At least, he’d assumed as much. Except Daniel could’ve gotten away at any time. He chose to stay.

He chose to let Stavros take him.

He offered up himself.

That knowledge fucked Stavros’ head up more.

What did it mean?

Why did Daniel leave? Stavros didn’t want to resent that.

Didn’t want to feel rejected by that.

Because how do you forgive someone for taking away your wife? How do you forgive yourself for not protecting the woman you loved? How did you reconcile attraction to the person who stole your life?

He didn’t have the answers.

Now, on top of all this Daniel shit, he had to deal with Felipe Guzmán.

After taking a shower, he poured himself a drink and went into his office. Felipe wasn’t allowed to think for a second that he had the upper hand on Stavros. That shit was unacceptable. Daniel had him running scared, Stavros had seen it in Felipe’s eyes. He stood in Daniel’s way, and if what Stavros heard about Daniel was true, familial ties didn’t stand in the way of the man getting what he wanted.

He’d killed his father, according to rumors.

Felipe wanted Stavros to do his dirty work, and that wasn’t going to happen. Stavros no longer wanted Daniel Nieto dead, and even if he did, he’d long given up his role as assassin for hire. If and when he killed, he’d do it for himself. Not because some wannabe thought he had him by the balls.

His mind went to Daniel again, which it damn well shouldn’t. He’d never spent so much time thinking about anyone, man or woman. He liked to play, liked to keep a different face in his bed. It kept him from getting bored, and doing something utterly destructive like thinking about Annika.

Oh, he’d been in love. He’d just never had a true relationship.

Before Annika, there’d been Helayna, who he’d met on the beach in Mikonos at seventeen. It had been Stavros’ father who discovered Helayna

had been assigned a male identity at birth, and it had been his father who chased her away, giving Stavros his first heartbreak.

Haimon Konstantinou saw Stavros' happiness as a weakness, something to take his focus away from their mercenary business. Haimon wanted an empire, an untouchable empire. And he wanted Stavros at the helm. In his father's mind, Stavros couldn't do that while caring for anything more than money and power. He loved Stavros in his own way, of course he did. But that way was more often than not cold, and at a distance.

Two years after Helayna, Annika entered his life, and Stavros took one look at her and handed over his heart. Haimon considered Annika his daughter in every way, and when he caught Stavros watching her, his own father held a sword to his throat. Annika was off limits. The disgust on his father's face said it all. And the threat he issued sealed the deal.

Touch Annika and Stavros gave up his claims to the business. It wasn't until his father died that Stavros even realized that he never wanted the fucking business. He stayed because he sought approval from the old man. He sought that brief flash of pride that would brighten Haimon's eyes when Stavros did his bidding.

Much as he wanted Annika, Stavros wanted that flash of pride more.

Annika didn't care, though, she took his heart and used it as a leash to control him, tease him, and fuck with him. Anything she wanted, he gave. But he got nothing in return. She exerted control in sex, and she liked to make Stavros watch as she fucked and got fucked.

He liked it too. Living the deceitful illusion that when she closed her eyes as she rode another man that she was pretending to ride Stavros. That the name she called when she came was his. He provided her with men, engaged in orgies with her, and still, he never got close enough to touch her.

Even then, he loved her to blindness.

He mourned her death even when she betrayed him, putting a hit on one of Stavros' ex-lovers and sending men to attack the man's family. Annika should've known better. The former mercenary reciprocated, and in the aftermath three lives were lost, Annika, Haimon, and his wife.

Identifying as pansexual, he was attracted to people regardless of sex or gender, but Stavros wasn't the person you went to in search of love. He was the one you went to if you wanted to be used and controlled, to be fucked and debased.

He tossed back the bourbon, grimacing. Last night wasn't even the best sex. It wasn't.

But it was, too. Because he craved it still. He felt every powerful thrust. Still. The taste of Daniel, the sound of him. They lingered, echoing.

Mocking.

He stared into his glass, searching for the truth of who he was now. Because he wasn't the same man Daniel had stolen from his place in Lisbon. He wasn't that man. This man, this man craved like a junkie did a needle. This man wanted. He needed.

His phone went off and he snatched it up from his desk, answering the security guard downstairs with a hoarse, "Yes?"

"Sir, Ms. Caynan is on her way up."

He cleared his throat. "Thanks." He hung up but didn't move, only bothering to lift his gaze from the drink in his hand when he heard his private elevator open. Heels sounded on the floor then Tennyson appeared in his office doorway, a smirk on her gorgeous face.

"Missed me, lover?"

He hadn't given her a second thought, but he smiled up at her. "Tenny, how are you?"

She strode into the room, clad in a white dress that was anything but simple on her curvy body. Reaching mid-thigh, the dress had a gold zipper running down the front, starting at her crotch and stopping just under the swell of her generous tits. Her skin, the richest onyx, glowed, and her hair —done this time in tiny braids—hung past her shoulders. She was soft everywhere, flexible too, and she eyed him now like a woman who'd had the privilege of seeing her cum all over his face.

"I was in the neighborhood," she said. "Thought I'd drop in on you." She smirked. "Make sure you were all right."

He sat back, placing his glass on the desk. "I am always all right," he lied smoothly. "Does Renzo Vega know you're in New York?"

Tennyson worked for Stavros, and her job was to keep tabs on Atlanta club-owner Renzo Vega. The man wasn't who he seemed to be, and Stavros didn't like puzzles. So Tennyson worked in Vega's club as a bartender. Originally, she was supposed to be in Vega's bed, until they found out the man preferred his lovers to be more…male.

"The club is shut down for a while, so I have the weekend off." She grinned and rounded the desk, placing her generous ass on the desk, next to

Stavros' drink. "Which is why my panties are also off." She dropped a scrap of black lace atop the desk, then grabbed his hand and placed it between her legs.

Yep, just smooth, bare wet skin. He kept his hand still as he gazed up at her. "Why is the club closed?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. Maintenance?"

He pulled away from her and got to his feet, ignoring her frown. "I pay you to know everything that goes on at that club, Tenny. I want to know why a club as successful as Vega's shuts down without notice, on a weekend no less."

"Fuck." She glared at him. "How do you propose I do that?"

He fisted her hair, yanking it back to expose her throat. "You're a resourceful woman," he whispered against her skin as he trailed a hand back up her thigh and between her legs. "I'm sure you can think of something." He grazed her clit with his knuckles then retreated when she whimpered. "Maybe when you bring me answers, I'll give what you came for."

She shuddered then took a deep breath and hopped off the desk. "You're lucky you pay me so damn much." She walked out the office and he followed. "And that you lay pipe better than any plumber."

He smiled as she got back onto the elevator. "Goodbye, Tenny."

She scowled and flipped him her middle finger. He chuckled as the elevator doors closed. Tenny was fun, and always wicked in bed. As he turned back to the room, a movement to his right caught his eye and he pulled his gun, spinning around just as Daniel Nieto stepped out of the shadows.

"What…" He just stared, unable to process. His mind couldn't keep up with his pulse, speeding, beating wildly. The. Fuck.

Daniel watched him with his unreadable dark eyes and smooth gaze, standing in the middle of Stavros' condo as if he belonged, clad in his ever present black. Stubble on his chin, hickey on his neck.

Stavros' hickey.

Jesus, he couldn't think. Did Daniel know the power he held simply standing there, all his attention on Stavros?

"Is she your lover?"

Stavros blinked at the question, lowering his gun. "How did you get in?" He cleared the hoarse quality from his voice. He had guards

downstairs. How did Daniel know which place belonged to Stavros? How had he gotten in?

“Is she your lover?”

Stavros found himself moving to him. Just, letting himself be pulled by the current, that magnetic thing that traveled between them. He fought it, yes he did, but not too hard. Feet in front of the other, he kept going until he was in Daniel’s face.

Close enough to feel his heat.

To smell his skin.

Jesus. Christ.

“Why are you here?” he rasped. He lifted his hand, spread his fingers then folded them slowly. A tight fist, nails biting into his palm as he struggled against reaching out, against touching Daniel’s throat, caressing the garrote imprint, a blatant sign that proclaimed Stavros’ failure and Daniel’s survival.

Daniel tilted his head back, gazing down at him with hooded eyes that didn’t quite hide the danger that was him. “You are here.”

Was he? Stavros didn’t feel it. How could he, when everything he felt was Daniel?

“The woman,” Daniel nodded to the elevator. “She is your lover?”

Stavros lost another battle, giving in to his need to touch Daniel. He slid his fingers down the other man’s throat then grasped him there. Not tight, but a hold Daniel felt all the same because he swallowed and his nostrils flared. “Not everyone I give my cock to is my lover,” Stavros murmured. “You should know.”

It was the wrong thing to say, he knew it, but he spoke the words anyway. He wanted a devastation, a severing of the hold Daniel Nieto had on him. He wanted a cure for the aches he hadn’t known existed, for the pain he hadn’t known he could feel.

He dropped his hand, fisting it again as he turned away.

“Do not.” Daniel’s warning chilled him, stopping Stavros in his tracks. “Do not.”

A tortured chuckle made its way past Stavros’ lips. “I can’t walk away, but you can?” he asked without turning around. “I can’t run away, but you can?”

“You wanted me gone.”

“Don’t tell me what the fuck I wanted.”

Jesus.

“Stavros.”

He heard that in his sleep. His name in that same obliterated tone, strangled with betrayal. Daniel’s betrayal of his dead wife. The wife Stavros killed. Even in his sleep, he found no relief from it. Betrayal, he choked on it.

He wanted to take just one breath that wasn’t filled with it.

Betrayal.

One kiss between them that didn’t taste of it.

“Mi papá had many vices,” Daniel spoke from behind him. “But the one I remember most was the drinking. He needed it first thing in the morning, bourbon in his coffee cup. He’d shake and tremble if he didn’t get it, diablo. I watched him fight and lose against that pull.” He paused and footsteps sounded as he moved closer. “You’re my bourbon. I can’t get you out of my veins.”

God. Damn. Stavros squeezed his eyes shut as heat washed across his nape. He didn’t want to hear this. He wanted to hold on to the anger, not fucking melt at the vulnerability Daniel just handed him.

“You should go.” Because he could. Daniel could leave. He could walk away. Stavros didn’t have that option.

“No.”

“Yes.” He spun to face Daniel. “You’re good at it. It’s what you do. You leave. You run.” He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe you can outrun it, the lust, the hunger. The betrayal for feeling any of those things at all.”

A muscle in Daniel’s jaw flexed as he stood there so ominously shrouded in black. The quietest man Stavros had ever known. Face so serious. Eyes understanding, because he knew. He knew… “I am not leaving.”

“Why not?” Stavros laughed at him. “Do you like it, that helpless feeling? Not recognizing yourself in the mirror. Do you like it?”

“I know who I am.”

“Good for you.” He went closer to Daniel, dragging his knuckles over his jaw. “Good for you, because I don’t know who I am. I don’t know who I am, and you’re the reason.” He bent slightly, letting his lips touch Daniel’s. “You get to run away from it whenever you chose,” he whispered. “But I’m stuck trying to figure it out. Then you show up.” His fingers tightened on Daniel’s skin. “And that’s when I know.”

Daniel caught him then, yanking him close until they were pressed together. Fingers on Stavros' chin, he tipped his face up. "What do you know?" He shook him. "Stavros, what do you know?"

"I am yours. To fuck. To torture. To kill. I am yours." For some reason, the truth of those words were the saddest thing Stavros ever experienced.

"Lo siento." The heaviness in Stavros' eyes and words dragged the apologies from Daniel's dry throat. "Lo siento." So much apologizing lately, to Petra and now to Stavros.

Stavros' lips tightened and he pulled away from Daniel's touch, striding quickly back into his office. "Let yourself out."

That wasn't going to happen, Stavros had to know that. Daniel followed him, standing in the doorway as Stavros gave him his back, fiddling with something on his desk. Getting into the penthouse hadn't been all that hard, not once he'd gotten close to the beautiful voluptuous woman in white.

"Stavros." He liked saying the name, watching Stavros' shoulders tighten every time. Sometimes he needed words and he couldn't find them. Like now. If he had the words he'd beg forgiveness for leaving Stavros in that Seattle hotel room. For staying away for so damn long, when he wanted to be next to Stavros. He'd confess to being unable to separate who Stavros was, and what he'd done, from what Daniel felt.

He'd tell the man standing so stiffly a couple feet away that he saw him take his wife's life every single time Daniel closed his eyes. He'd tell him it didn't matter how far he ran or how long he denied himself, the bitter betrayal sitting like a cold brick on his chest still wasn't enough to keep him away.

He didn't have the words, except, "Lo siento." He begged forgiveness from both Stavros and Petra.

"There's no need to be sorry." Stavros glanced back at him over his shoulder, eyes hard, expression cold. "It's over. It's done now." He swallowed then returned his attention to the papers on his desk. "You can leave."

It took everything, but Daniel went to him. Silent steps on the carpeted floor, until he was close enough to touch Stavros. He grabbed a fistful of

Stavros' hair, yanking his head back onto his shoulder. Stavros struggled. He always did, but Daniel used his other hand to lock around his throat.

"Is that truly what you want?" He tightened his hold. "Say it again, and I give it to you."

Stavros shuddered against him, his body hard, the smell of him already so damn familiar. "Daniel." He panted.

"I can leave," Daniel whispered at his ear. "But it doesn't matter how far or how fast I run." The truth roughened his already destroyed voice. "I'll always come back."

Stavros' struggling ceased and he dropped his hand, gripping Daniel's thigh, fingers digging into him.

"I can't say I don't want you." The words were coming now, and he couldn't stop them. He released his hold on Stavros, nuzzling him, inhaling him as he dragged his lips along the column of his neck. "I can't say I don't need you. I'm very much the fool, caught in this moment with you, unwilling to walk away."

Stavros twisted around in his arms until they were nose to nose, chest to chest. "We're both fools," he murmured. But his eyes asked Daniel not to leave, and he listened.

He kissed Stavros, pouring out his desperation and desires into the other man who grasped him tight, moaning into his mouth, licking at him. Daniel tugged on Stavros' hair tighter, pulling his head backward as he plastered himself against the body shuddering against him. Hard and tight, and intimately hot.

A body he was familiar with, yet he still wanted to get to know it better.

Impatient hands roamed up and down his back, grabbing his ass, pulling him in tighter. Daniel groaned, tongue sliding over Stavros'. Teeth nicked him, fingers pinched him. He drowned in all of it, the sensations.

Disappearing.

He disappeared into Stavros' mouth, into his touch. Falling faster and harder than he ever intended. He didn't outrun the betrayal. No, it stayed with him, keeping pace with every thrust of his tongue into Stavros' hot and wet mouth. Every tug on Stavros' hair. Every roll of his hips that pushed him into Stavros' body, erections grinding.

That betrayal turned what should have been gentle touches into something harder, darker. Hands that once destroyed him touched him now, tearing at his shirt, popping buttons, exposing his chest. Hot and rough, that

touch as Stavros stroked his skin, fingers ghosting over the tattoo over his heart.

Her name.

Daniel tore his mouth away. Panting. Aching for so many things. He caught Stavros' head in both hands, holding his gaze as Stavros' touch dipped downward, past his torso.

"Do it."

Stavros licked his wet lips and Daniel kissed him again. From that very first kiss to now, he tasted the same. Forbidden. Dark and sinful. Wild and dangerous. Everything Daniel craved. One taste hooked him, kept him leashed and dependent like an addict.

With his pants unbuckled and unzipped, they slid effortlessly to his knees as Stavros touched him. A tight grip on his cock.

Daniel threw his head back with a hoarse groan. One squeeze and his body went weak, knees knocking. Teeth gritted, he stepped back, stumbling, pushing Stavros back onto his desk. When Daniel wasn't looking Stavros had also unbuttoned his shirt and it hung open. Under Daniel's heavy-lidded scrutiny, Stavros unbuckled his pants and stepped out of them, teeth in his bottom lip.

Daniel touched him, sliding a hand down his front. Stroking his cock.

Stavros gasped for him, mouth opening as he panted, hips jerking, shoving himself fully into Daniel's palm. He was hot, hard and pulsing. And Daniel liked it. Liked the pre-cum that beaded and dripped along his length, wetting Stavros and him.

"Daniel."

Daniel lifted his gaze, meeting Stavros' gaze. "Let me take you."

Stavros' Adam's apple shifted. "Take whatever you want."

"You." That was what Daniel wanted, so he leaned in, burying his face in Stavros' neck, stroking him still. Stavros snaked a hand between them, reciprocating. Cupping Daniel's balls.

He groaned. Low and deep, because this man's touch woke him up every single time. "Stav," he moaned the name.

"Yes." Stavros' eyes popped open and he pulled away slightly. "Fuck. Shit. Wait." He turned, laying over the desk, taut, naked ass exposed to Daniel as he yanked on the drawers on his desk. He tossed some condoms atop the desk.

And a bottle of lube.

When he moved to straighten, Daniel held him still with a hand on his nape. Another cupping his ass. He quickly grabbed the lube, squeezing out the thick gel-like substance into Stavros' crack, before sliding his fingers through it.

"Mmm." Stavros bent, forehead banging on the desk, ass tipped up. One leg hiked up onto the desk, opening himself for Daniel's fingers.

He dipped into that valley then lower, pressing a finger into Stavros.

"Fuck." Stavros grabbed onto the edges of the desk and rocked back on him. "Fuck."

Daniel added another finger, stretching him, pushing inside. Stavros flinched.

"Oh fuck." His body shook, muscles squeezing Daniel's digits. "Harder. Please."

Daniel grunted, adding more lube then another finger. Giving him harder, ramming his body up onto the desk. All the while Stavros cried out, begging for harder.

Calling his name.

This was an entirely new feeling. The power and control, watching Stavros take his fingers. Daniel bent, sinking his teeth into Stavros' nape, licking him, tasting the salt and sex on his skin.

"Argh. Yes." Inside, Stavros was fire, burning. Scorching.

Daniel wanted to feel it, wanted to get close to those flames. He ached to feel the fire, so he removed his fingers, tearing at the condom wrapper before he donned the protection. He stared at Stavros' body for a moment, draped over the desk. He could take him like that, sink into him without looking into his eyes. But that made no difference.

He knew what he was doing. With whom. Didn't matter if he took him like that or face to face, there'd be no escaping the truth of it. He stepped back, taking Stavros' hand, turning him around before pulling him upward to a seated position at the edge of the desk.

Then Daniel kissed him. There was truth in this, both hands cupping Stavros' ass, pulling him closer. The other man's legs wrapped around his waist, their lips clinging to each other as Daniel brought his shaft to Stavros' body and pushed in.

"Nnggh."

He swallowed Stavros' drawn out groan, eyes sliding shut as sensation wrapped around his length then sped upward. Breath was immediately in

short supply. Heat washed over him. Wrapped so tight around him, he felt Stavros' body vibrate.

Daniel tensed. His fingers, gripping tightly to Stavros' hips were the only part of him moving, flexing against Stavros' skin. Teeth sank into his bottom lip. Stavros biting him, hurting him, egging him on. He flexed his hips, sinking even deeper.

"Fuck," Stavros groaned against his mouth.

Daniel pulled back then thrust in.

Stavros flinched. His ass clamped down on Daniel. "Yes." He dragged his fingers down Daniel's back. Sharp pain that kicked Daniel's pulse into overdrive.

He slammed in again.

"Oh God. Daniel," Stavros cried his name. "Dan—"

"Sí." He licked Stavros' nose. "Tell me." What you want. What you need. What you feel.

"Oh God. Deeper." Stavros' lips were on Daniel's throat, and with each word he spoke, he kissed him there. On his scarred flesh. "Deeper. Fuck."

One hand on Stavros' nape, the other on his right hip, Daniel went deeper. Harder. Stavros rode each thrust, panting against his throat, breath hot and gasping on his skin. A heavy groan left Stavros every time he sank onto Daniel, the hungry sound echoing around them. Taking over Daniel's mind.

He fell.

If he'd ever been in grace's favor, he fell. Teeth in Stavros' skin, fingers gripping tight as he hung on, pounding into a body that fit around him like it was custom-made. Hot and so tight, contracting, squeezing him. All that pleasure, he dove into it 'til his body got weak. Giving Stavros what he asked for.

Deeper.

Harder.

The man who'd destroyed him before touched him now with fire. Consuming him. Fingers sinking into his chest, nails scraping at the tattoo of her.

Petra's name over his heart, Stavros touched it, fingers clawing as Daniel slammed into him. They touched each other with hands covered in blood only they could see.

Forbidden sex, drenched in blood and betrayal. The perversity of it got him harder. Made him even thirstier. Mouth on Stavros, cock inside him, Daniel fell from grace. Happily. Hooded gaze on Stavros' face, twisted in a blissed out grimace. Sweat on his skin, whisker burns on his throat, body writhing against Daniel's. He was the same man under the influence of pleasure as he was under pain.

They'd given each other pain.

Now came the pleasure.

A movement between them stole his focus and he dipped his gaze, watching as Stavros stroked himself. His body contracted around Daniel, tightening. His legs trembled and his head dropped back, mouth opening as he arched, cum spraying between them.

Daniel took his mouth, tasting his orgasm, eating his cries, letting all of it pull him toward his own climax. His movements sped up, brutal and desperate.

Painful and raw.

Vision darkening, fingers clawing at Stavros. Biting, groaning, and shuddering as he poured out his release into the condom. Stavros' muscles kept clenching, making Daniel's cock jerk.

He collapsed onto Stavros. Shaking. Panting. Hands circled him. Lips brushed his temple. He couldn't move, body spasming still. Stavros' body was doing the same, but he made no move to get Daniel off him.

They clung to each other atop that desk.

Did Stavros feel as adrift as Daniel felt?

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CHAPTER TWENTY

"How did you get in?" Stavros asked at Daniel's ear.

They hadn't moved from the office or the desk. Daniel had shifted away to get rid of the condom and toss it into the wastebasket over in the corner of the room, but Stavros remained seated on the desk, his legs around Daniel's waist.

His arms around him, too.

Daniel's head was on Stavros shoulder, face buried in his neck. His legs and lower back protested that position, but he refused to move. Until Stavros spoke, they'd settled into a charged silence.

So much to say, no idea how to say it.

He cleared his throat. "Told the woman in white—"

"Tennyson."

He grunted. "Told her we were business associates so we rode up together." He'd waved her ahead of him when they entered the condo.

"You know I'll have to fire them now, right?" Stavros' hand slid up and down Daniel's back slowly, making him shiver.

"That's up to you, but you need loyal help." He lifted his head and met Stavros' slumberous gaze. "The woman, I watched her take off her panties."

Stavros chuckled. "Tenny is…one of a kind." He sobered. "I'm not fucking her, if that's your way of asking."

Daniel touched his face. "My way of asking is to ask, Mr. Konstantinou." Stavros' nostrils flared when Daniel addressed him so formally, and in response, Daniel's semi-flaccid shaft jerked.

Wanting again.

“So why was she here to see you?”

Stavros’ expression went blank. “That’s business.” His teeth bared in a shark-like smile. “Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

But Daniel wouldn’t and they both knew it. Stavros dropped his legs with a low groan, releasing Daniel who stumbled off him. His legs were rubber, spine cracking as he straightened.

“Are you leaving?” The forced nonchalance in Stavros’ voice didn’t suit him.

Daniel paused in the process of pulling on his pants. “Still in a hurry for me to go?” He lifted an eyebrow, and Stavros turned away from him, quickly stepping back into his pants.

“Just a question.”

But it wasn’t. Daniel put back on only his underwear. “Unless you’re kicking me out,” he said softly. “I’m not leaving.”

Stavros stiffened, but he didn’t speak and he didn’t turn around. When the silence got to be too much, Daniel spoke again.

“Stavros.” Daniel went to him, yanking him around with one hand on his shoulder.

“What?” The anger in his voice didn’t match the look in his eyes, so Daniel focused on him, on his face.

“Are you kicking me out? Because I want to stay with you.”

Stavros flinched, Daniel saw it. Felt it. And he waited for a response to his question. The same struggle inside him, he watched it play out on Stavros’ face. He knew enough about the Greek to know he wasn’t a man who showed vulnerabilities. Ever. But he was showing Daniel this.

He touched Stavros, fingers sliding over his jaw, the days-old whiskers there prickling his skin.

“No.” Stavros closed his eyes on a whisper. “No, I’m not kicking you out.”

“I want to take you in your bed,” Daniel told him and watched Stavros’ swallow. “Do you want me in your bed?”

Stavros’ eyes flew open. And he was that, open. Vulnerable. “Yes.”

The word were easy enough, but Daniel knew it cost Stavros to show that kind of weakness. He nodded. “Lead the way.”

The bedroom was large, with beige carpeting and white walls. Expensive art decorated the walls, but all Daniel had eyes for was the huge bed. He’d seen Stavros being his usual debauched self in a lot of places,

mainly the villa in Lisbon, but he'd never seen images of this bedroom. He faced Stavros. "Shower?"

The Greek pointed to the en-suite bathroom. "Everything you need is in there." He dropped onto the bed, and fell backward with a sigh. "And I'll be here."

After one last glance back at him, Daniel went in to grab a quick shower. He wasn't in there more than twenty minutes, but when he came back out, a red towel wrapped around his waist, Stavros was awake, head propped against the pillows, waiting for him.

Daniel stood over him, watching. Stavros didn't lose his hard edge even in this position. But it showed how much he trusted Daniel. Staring down at him, eyeing the small scratches on his neck, the whisker burns Daniel put on his face and throat, something inside Daniel stretched.

Yawning. Reaching out to that man on the bed.

How all this happened, he still didn't know. He questioned it. How could he not? But he wasn't running from it. Wasn't lying about it. It made no sense to do that anymore. Not when simply looking down at Stavros made him smile.

He dropped the towel and climbed onto that bed, sitting back on his haunches as he brought his hands to the front of Stavros' pants.

Stavros blinking. "Wha—"

"Shh, let me." He didn't wait for a reply, and Stavros didn't give one, except to lift his lower half off the bed. Daniel yanked and tugged on his pants until they were down Stavros' hips then pulled the clothing off and tossed it to the floor.

Then he let his gaze fall.

In the bunker, he hadn't allowed himself to appreciate Stavros' body. And they'd had sex, but Daniel hadn't taken the time to explore. But now he did, and under his gaze, Stavros' naked cock hardened and lengthened, pearly drops forming at the flushed and shiny tip.

A light dusting of dark hair covered his chest and torso. His body spoke of strength without being too muscular. For a man who lived a life of excess, his body didn't show it. He'd lost weight as Daniel's captive, but it did nothing to diminish his frame.

Stavros shifted and his scent, faint sweat coupled with the scorching musk of their earlier sex hit Daniel's nose. His body was beyond hard in an instant, arousal pounding through his veins. Saliva pooling.

“I want your touch.” Stavros licked his lips. “I crave it.”

Daniel felt it too, that craving. It shook his foundation, took over his reasoning. It brought him here, and kept him there.

“Tócame, Daniel.” *Touch me.* The thighs pressed to Daniel’s vibrated. “Touch me. Any way you want.”

The need in his voice called to Daniel. An invisible chain connecting them, yanking, pulling Daniel closer and closer. He circled Stavros’ throat for a heartbeat, grunting when Stavros arched. He liked that. Feared he would always like that, the lines of Stavros’ body pulling taut when he leaned into Daniel’s hold.

He dragged his hand down, and Stavros placed a palm over his, pushing Daniel down, past his chest and torso.

“Tócame.” His cock lay atop his belly, thick, the veins bulging. Dripping.

Daniel touched a fingertip to Stavros’ swollen crown. Stavros groaned, hips coming off the bed instantly. Under Daniel’s touch, he trembled and quivered. Daniel traced that length, watching it twitch and jerk with every stroke.

Stavros gripped the sheets, pulling, arching, head thrown back as he strained. He moaned, and that sound, it hooked on the need inside of Daniel.

Jerking.

He pushed into the mattress, pressing his shaft against the material, seeking relief. Shaking with that want, all the while knowing there was only one way he’d get it.

Clear liquid pooled just under Stavros’ navel. Warm and sticky pre-cum. Stavros made his sounds as Daniel touched him, but Daniel couldn’t. Their heat had dried out his mouth, taking his saliva, making his throat ache as he watched himself go places, and do things, he’d never expected.

The lube they’d used earlier landed next to him, and he didn’t look up from his task to thank Stavros as he quickly squeezed some onto his fingers.

Stavros’ legs drew up, bending at the knees, exposing himself. Daniel didn’t hesitate to move lower, sliding his slick fingers over Stavros’ balls and hole.

Stavros gasped, legs tense. Vibrating.

Daniel looked up then, watching Stavros’ face as his lover panted, lips parted, teeth sinking into the corner of his bottom lip. He grabbed on to the

metal headboard with his both hands.

And he lifted his ass in offering.

Daniel's heart thumped in his chest. Sweat trickled down his spine. He ached. His cock? Wet. Soaked. Aroused to the point of combustion.

He circled Stavros with two fingers. Then he pushed inside the tight clasp.

Stavros started talking then, calling his name in short gasps. "Daniel! Oh fuck. Oh fuck." His face twisted into a sexy grimace. Face flushed. Sweat on his brow, nose and torso made his body glisten.

Daniel grabbed an ass cheek, pulled it to the side, and thrust in. Three fingers. The tightest heat, clenching around him.

He shuddered, tunneling in and out.

"Daniel. Oh fuck." Stavros's thighs shook. His chest rose and fell as he gulped his breaths, but he circled his hips. Moving on Daniel's fingers. Inviting him back, enticing him to stay.

So dangerous. But it was everything Daniel liked. Everything he needed.

"Fuck me." Stavros' head was thrown back, veins bulging in his neck. "Yes." He groaned, low and long. "Yes. Ah fuck."

Daniel pulled his fingers free and sat back, putting on a condom, applying lube. Every touch made his eyes cross. Made his vision flash white. He bit the inside of his cheek as he brought himself to Stavros' body and plunged deep.

"Argh. Dios." He found his voice then.

Stavros flinched away, but Daniel grabbed him, held him still and continued. Giving him what he wanted. His body immediately molded around Daniel, squeezing tight, clamping down, but that didn't stop him from pressing on. Because Stavros got harder with each stroke. He hurt, but from the look in his eyes, he liked the hurt.

Daniel liked giving him that hurt. Inch by inch he entered, and Stavros welcomed him in with the canting of his hips, and the sounds he made.

Daniel's name on his lips. "Daniel."

Daniel swallowed, tasted blood, and realized he'd bitten the inside of his cheek.

"Please," Stavros said in a huskier whisper. Begging as he tore at the sheets. "Por favor. Daniel, por favor."

He slammed the rest of the way in, and Stavros cried out.

“Fuck. Fuck.” He lurched forward and fisted Daniel’s hair, pulling tight. “Don’t stop.” Legs wrapped around Daniel’s waist, caging him in. “Don’t stop.”

Daniel grunted. There was no way. No way he’d stop. “Diablo.” He plunged in and out, shaking, fingers pinching into Stavros’ thigh. Burying himself deep with each thrust.

Stavros moved with him, slamming back on him. “I’m gonna come.” He gripped his shaft and stroked it once. “Daniel,” he sounded panicked. “I’m gonna come.”

“Do it,” Daniel managed to grit out. “Come for me, diablo.”

Stavros froze, eyes wide, mouth open, cum spewing into his hand. His body clenched, tightened.

Daniel hissed, head thrown back, hips working over to handle the fames dancing at the base of his spine. “Dios. Dios.” He exploded, fingers scrambling to hold onto a bucking Stavros. His lungs burned as he fought to breathe.

Always a battle to breathe when it came to Stavros.

He removed the condom with trembling hands, tossing it into the nearby garbage can, before collapsing onto Stavros. Their bodies were damp with sweat, but Daniel didn’t mind it. He didn’t mind Stavros’ cum sticking to him. He didn’t mind that Stavros hadn’t eased up his grip on Daniel’s hair.

He especially didn’t mind the hand that stroked down his back and gripped his ass.

“I’m staying the night,” he murmured into Stavros’ shoulder.

Stavros simply hummed and nestled closer, lips brushing Daniel’s throat. His lashes fluttered against Daniel’s fevered skin, one hand circled his waist and a leg draped over him.

New things. This person he was now had to get used to new things. Like this. Like another man snuggled up next to him in bed, breathing on him as he settled into sleep like this was the most natural thing in the world.

Daniel rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling with one hand under his head, the other around Stavros’ naked shoulders.

At one time he’d had comfort, he’d had softness, and he’d had Petra. He’d thought his life couldn’t be better. He’d thought himself the luckiest bastard out there, having her. Having someone who knew him, who understood the monster trapped under his skin.

Then in the blink of an eye he lost her. No, not lost. She'd been taken. By men like him who considered themselves judge, jury and executioner. By a man like him. With Petra gone, so was softness, so was anyone who saw and understood him for who he was.

He'd missed it, but he hadn't wanted it back. He found his comfort in embracing his bloody revenge vendetta.

But he was here now, surrounded by Stavros. In Stavros' embrace he found himself again. In his presence he found calm and peace. Understanding, too.

She wouldn't hate him for that, would she?

She'd understand, wouldn't she?

She'd see it, she'd understand just how much Stavros stunned Daniel. She had to know how hard he fought his connection to Stavros. She had to know how impossible it was to fight your heart.

She had to know how difficult it had been to breathe in her absence, and that Stavros made it easier. One bit at a time. One breath at a time, until it wasn't so hard. Wasn't so painful.

"Petra," he whispered her name in the quiet darkness. "Forgive me." She must know he'd been in that coffin with her, six feet under and suffocating until Stavros helped him come up for air.

But what if she didn't? What if she'd been waiting for him to deliver justice like he'd promised? What if she was still waiting for him to be true to her? Would she recognize her husband the way he was now? In bed with the man who'd slit her throat, halfway gone in love with him.

When she'd been alive, Daniel had expected her to accept so many things, and she'd done it. The violence and the danger. She'd accepted it all.

But was this too much?

What if repairing Daniel's broken heart meant shattering everything he'd had with Petra in the process?

Was there anything of the man he used to be left in him today?

Daniel didn't know. The questions sat on him, the heaviest boulder, as he let Stavros' snores put him to sleep.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The sound of his phone going off jerked Daniel upright, but it hadn't woken him. He'd been awake for a while, alternating between staring at Stavros sleep, and glaring up at the ceiling.

He scrambled off the bed, racing into the living area of the large penthouse. His clothes were strewn across a chair and he searched through his pants pockets in the dark room until he found his phone.

He blew out a breath when he saw the caller's identity. "Toro."

"A meeting has been set up."

"Tell me." He pulled on his pants then shrugged into the shirt as he walked over to the window.

"Felipe called a meeting with Perez," Toro said.

"Where and when?" He fumbled with the buttons on the shirt then rolled his eyes at himself when he realized he'd taken Stavros' by mistake.

"Day after tomorrow." When Toro named the location, Daniel grunted.

The two gangs could massacre each other, or they'd finally realize a third party was playing them against each other. Daniel didn't care either way.

"What do you want to do?" Toro asked.

"Nothing. Let's see how it all plays out."

Toro went silent.

"Toro."

"Where are you?"

"I am with Stavros." He pressed a palm to the cool glass, eyeing his reflection. "We will talk when we see each other."

“You can’t trust him, tío.” Toro’s confused anger stoked the betrayal curdling in Daniel’s belly. “He has no loyalties.”

“I’ll handle it.” Except he didn’t know if that was still true where Stavros was concerned.

Toro snorted and hung up in his ear.

Daniel sighed. All of this was new territory. But he wanted the Greek, and he had to live with that. He had to find a way to reconcile what he’d done with Stavros tonight with what Stavros had done.

How did he do that?

He stared down at the phone still in his hand. He should be gone, but somehow he was still in this place, smelling Stavros on his skin and on the shirt he hadn’t even bothered to button. He’d had sex with the man asleep in the next room.

Hot and hard and so many degrees of good, but he’d been in it with his eyes wide open. He’d known what he was doing, with whom, and he wanted more of it.

A door opened behind him. He tensed, but didn’t turn around, and soon a hand slid up his back.

“You’re still here.” Stavros’ voice was scratchy with sleep. Alluring.

“I am.”

“Hmm.” Lips at Daniel’s nape, Stavros hummed. “And you’re wearing my shirt.”

The corners of Daniel’s mouth curved. “Do you mind?”

Arms circled his waist and Stavros’ head dropped to rest against Daniel’s back. “I do, but only because I want to touch your skin.”

Daniel caught both of Stavros’ hands and guided them to each side of the unbuttoned shirt. “Take it off.”

Stavros did and the shirt floated away, settling at their feet with a faint rustle. Lips brushed Daniel’s back. He had a tattoo there, one single piece that took up much of his entire back.

A tattoo of Petra floating in the clouds, her hair blowing in the wind, her signature wicked smile curving her lips. A twinkle in her eye.

The light from only one lamp over in the corner glowed, leaving the suite in shadows. So maybe Stavros didn’t see the details of the ink on Daniel’s back. Maybe he didn’t see it as he placed kisses along Daniels’ shoulder then down his spine.

Daniel bowed his head with a groan, clutching both of Stavros' hands to his belly. The last time somebody's hands on him felt this right had been the night of his first date with Petra and she'd slid her hand in his as they walked to his car.

He twisted around, and caught Stavros by the nape, pulling him against his chest. "Hola."

He was gorgeous, this man Daniel had hated and tortured. When he smiled, when his eyes glittered and his lips curved. When his cheeks got those dimples, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Hola."

They stared at each other, Stavros' arms still around Daniel's waist. His hand on Stavros' nape, thumb stroking him absently.

"This is crazy, you know that right?"

Daniel nodded. "I know." He took a deep breath and put his forehead to Stavros'. "I have to go."

The Greek tensed slightly. "Is this you running from me?"

"Yes." Daniel gave him the truth, rubbing his nose over Stavros'. "But I'll always end up back here, next to you."

"Do you want to be here?" Stavros asked against his lips. "I could chase you, hunt you down, but I don't do that 'for sport' shit." He touched Daniel's chin. "I'm not the catch and release type."

Daniel grinned and under his touch, Stavros' pulse answered. Speeding up. "I want to be here." He brushed his lips over Stavros'. "You should know that by now," he murmured.

The other man exhaled, his hot breath lashing Daniel's lips, tickling him. He was solid, hot and warm, and holding him like this, holding him in his arms, Daniel didn't want to go anywhere. He calmed in Stavros' presence. He lived.

Lips pressed together, he moved over Stavros', tongue flicking over him until he opened. Then Daniel pushed in, sinking deep with a groan.

Dios.

Stavros clutched him, fingers gripping tight, urging Daniel on. So he deepened the kiss, picked up the speed, and soon they were devouring each other. Tongues twisting, teeth clicking as they fought for the upper hand. It didn't matter who had it.

This sensation in Daniel's belly, like he was falling.

The taste of Stavros, as dark and dangerous as the man rubbing against Daniel.

He liked it, wanted more, and always. He held Stavros tighter, pulling him flush against him as he went all in, cupping his jaw, shoving his tongue deeper.

Eyes closed, Daniel moaned when Stavros dropped a hand between them and rubbed his crotch. He pulled away with a low hiss, eyelids lowered to find Stavros watching him.

It was more than crazy. More than anything they could name, but it didn't matter. It was happening. Daniel wanted it to happen. When Stavros licked his lips, Daniel touched him there then pushed his fingers into Stavros' mouth.

He'd never touched another man like this before. But he knew what he wanted, knew what he liked, and he was going with the flow that swept him off his feet whenever he got in the same room with Stavros.

"Daniel." This side of Stavros he hadn't witnessed while watching him from the shadows. The softness in his eyes. The vulnerability on his face, and the need that poured off him in thick, hot waves, tightening Daniel's groin. "Kiss me."

Daniel slammed their mouths together, plundering, biting, licking, sucking on Stavros' tongue. Hands roaming Stavros' body, sliding down his back to grip his ass. Daniel squeezed him, and Stavros lifted one leg, wrapping it around Daniel's waist, undulating against him, riding him as their cocks rubbed.

Daniel shivered. It was intense, lust and need so thick he tasted it, the heavy layer coating his tongue and his skin. He wanted back on that bed, back inside Stavros.

Dios.

He'd lost his mind, but he didn't care. Not now. He felt. He wanted. He needed.

Stavros' hands on Daniel's ass pulled him closer, and Daniel tore at the tie on Stavros' pajama bottoms, fingers awkward, fumbling in his haste. Stavros helped, and soon they had him naked.

Daniel touched him, wrapping his fist around Stavros' erection, and the other man gulped into the kiss.

He stroked Stavros, root to tip, and Stavros' hips moved with him, his mouth falling open. He read Stavros' body as he stroked him. The tense

lines of his body. The quaking in his limbs and the color on his cheeks.

“You look good like this,” he murmured in Spanish. “In the midst of your pleasure. You should always look like this.”

“Keep touching me.” Stavros’ face twisted into a grimace when Daniel slid a thumb over his slippery crown. “Fuck.” He inhaled sharply, shoving himself deeper into Daniel’s slippery grip. “Just keep touching me.”

Daniel buried his face in Stavros’ neck, teasing him with his teeth as he pulled on his cock. He pulsed loudly in Daniel’s hand, veins prominent, pre-cum soaking them.

“You feel so good.” He tugged on Stavros’ earlobe. “So good.” He kissed his way across Stavros’ jaw and back to his mouth, taking his lips again, stroking his tongue inside the wet warmth.

Stavros’ fingers tangled in his hair, tugging, pulling and he got louder. His hips rocking faster and faster. The desperation in him spurred Daniel to tighten his grip, to roughen the kiss. Soon Stavros cried out, a sound Daniel swallowed as hot cream drenched his knuckles.

“Shit.” Stavros panted. “Shit.” His hips kept slamming forward. “Daniel, Jesus. Christ.”

Daniel smiled despite the ache of his own unfulfilled orgasm. “You liked that?”

Stavros’ lashed lifted and he stared at Daniel with an incredulous expression. “You’re fishing for compliments now?” He caught Daniel’s cum-filled hand and held it up. “Only compliment you’ll ever need.” Then he brought Daniel’s to his mouth and licked his fingers clean.

Daniel watched him hungrily, one hand sliding under the waistband of his pants to stroke himself.

“Let me.” Stavros pushed his hand away and went to his knees. One hand tugged Daniel’s pants down, the other cupped his ball, and then Daniel found himself surrounded by a hot wet mouth, sliding up and down his length.

“Argh.” He fisted Stavros’ hair, threw his head back and thrust into him. Over and over, riding his hungry mouth with harsh grunts. Orgasm wasn’t far away, still he chased it, slamming down Stavros’ throat.

Fingers cupped his balls, caressed him, as Stavros sucked him down whole. Daniel locked his knees, one hand on the window at his back for balance and the other pulling on Stavros’ hair as he used his mouth, and drove deeper down his throat.

One thrust.

Two, and he was biting down on his tongue, spilling inside Stavros' mouth as breath rattled in his throat and his body bowed.

"Dios."

Stavros hummed around him, making greedy, slurping noises as he cleaned Daniel's shaft. Then he pulled off him with a wet sound, and looked up at him, tongue swirling over his bottom lip.

"You don't swear, do you?" His lips curved into a smile.

Daniel blinked the orgasm from his eyes as he shook his head. "No." His voice was worse than usual, and he felt Stavros' shiver as the other man staggered to his feet. Daniel caught his hand and tugged him onto the couch. "My mother didn't like foul language, so…" He shrugged.

"I think it's sweet." Stavros chuckled as he stroked a finger down Daniel's cheek. "Big bad cartel boss who can't say fuck."

Daniel kissed him, because he wanted to shut him up. Also because he could smell himself on Stavros' breath and he wanted to taste it. "I can say it." He licked into Stavros' mouth. "I just choose not to."

"Sweet."

He grunted, but allowed himself a small smile. Together they sat in the dark on the couch, naked, Stavros' hand on Daniel's chest. Daniel's hands in Stavros' hair. In the dark, Stavros' eyes glittered, seeming brighter. Daniel kissed his nose, then his lips again before speaking.

"I have to go. The plane is waiting."

"Okay." Stavros kissed his chin then his throat then pulled away slightly to turn on the light. "I'll be here."

"What about Lisbon?" Daniel got up and started getting dressed.

Stavros got up and poured himself a drink from the mini bar. "New York is my home for the foreseeable future."

Once Daniel finished dressing, he looked around to find Stavros leaning against the bar, drink in his hand, watching him. With his hair all tousled from Daniel's manhandling, and his naked body still wearing the flush of his recent orgasm, he was the best looking thing Daniel had ever seen.

He went to Stavros, sliding his arms around his narrow waist, dropping a kiss on his forehead. "I only use burner phones," he told Stavros softly. "They change weekly. Sometimes daily."

Eyes narrowed, Stavros watched him. "'Okay."

"I can't give you something stable to reach me."

Stavros cocked his head. “Do you want me to reach you?”

“Sí.”

“Then I will.” He took a sip of his drink.

Biting back a smile, Daniel rubbed his lips over Stavros’ nose. “Do you want me to reach you?”

Stavros rolled his eyes. “Sí.”

Daniel kissed him. Slower this time. A pace meant for savoring, embedding Stavros on his senses, hoping to do the same for the other man. With Stavros on his tongue, he didn’t want to leave, but he finally pulled away with great reluctance.

“I’ll see you around, Mr. Konstantinou.” He stepped back.

Stavros smirked, holding up his glass as a salute. “I look forward to it.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The hushed voice roused Stavros from sleep, and he lifted his head with a grunt, blinking when the overhead light burned his eyes.

"Make it happen," Daniel growled.

Stavros blinked again and when his eyes adjusted, he spotted Daniel standing with his phone to his ear as he buttoned up his shirt. Stavros glanced at the clock. 4.22 a.m. He lurched upright.

"It is not a request, Agent Hutchins. Do not mistake my calm for forgiveness. That would be a grave error on your part." He turned then, noticed Stavros watching him, and said into the phone, "You have one hour." He ended the call and slid the phone into his pocket as he watched Stavros.

"Hey."

"Hi." He cupped Stavros' face. "I have to go."

For the past week, Daniel had been in his bed every night. A first for Stavros. Except for Bruce, the people he brought to his bed never lasted a full week. He'd prided himself on variety. But who cared about that with Daniel Nieto on his fucking knees and his mouth open?

He stayed silent as Daniel sank onto the bed as he put on his shoes. He must have sensed Stavros' disquiet, because he turned to him when he was finished, one hand touching Stavros' knee.

"My brother was attacked." His gaze was hard, cold.

Shit. "Is Levi—"

"I have more than one brother, you know." Daniel stood as Stavros gaped up at him.

“Wait. Antonio?” The brother in prison? “Antonio is the one who got attacked?”

“Sí. He is not good.” A ping sounded and Daniel pulled out his phone, glancing at it before nodding shortly to Stavros. “I will be in contact.” He walked into the bathroom, and Stavros called after him.

“You didn’t ask if I’m behind it.” If he’d been in Daniel’s shoes, he’d be his first suspect. He had gone after Levi and the nephew, Toro.

“No, I did not,” Daniel reappeared and approached Stavros on the bed. Bending, he brushed his lips over Stavros’ forehead. When he made to straighten, Stavros caught him by the nape, keeping him at eye level.

“Don’t you want to know if I ordered a hit on your brother?”

“No.” Daniel kissed him. Hard and quick, tasting like toothpaste and banked lust.

Stavros stared at him when he pulled back, searching his gaze. He saw Daniel Nieto in there, the ruthless killer. And he also saw his lover. He didn’t see any doubts or any questions regarding Stavros’ role in his brother’s attack.

Still, Stavros told him, “I didn’t do it.”

Daniel smiled. *Smiled* as his knuckles grazed Stavros jaw then dipped to his throat. “I know this.”

“How?” How could he know?

“I know you.” One last kiss and he pulled away.

“Wait. Shit.” Stavros shook his head to clear it. “I keep meaning to tell you, Felipe Guzmán wants you dead.”

Daniel held himself still. “Lots of people want me dead, diablo.” His face was expressionless when he said, “You did, not too long ago.”

“Just listen.” Stavros quickly replayed the conversation he had with Guzmán.

“I will handle it,” Daniel said.

“How? He’s her brother. Can you hurt her brother?” he asked softly.

Daniel’s jaw tightened. “I have to go.”

Fuck. Fine. “So go.”

Daniel stood there in the doorway for a few more heartbeats, watching him. Then he turned away, walked off, and Stavros didn’t move until he heard the elevator doors close.

He flopped back down onto the pillows.

Goddamn it.

Van waved Daniel inside the house, and Levi was right there, concern on his features as he waited for Daniel to speak.

Three days he'd been focused on nothing but Antonio.

"He is stable," he told Levi shortly. Stable was the best the doctors could do. The full truth of how Antonio got attacked wasn't known. It might never be. He hadn't been recognizable in that narrow bed in the hospital they'd snuck Daniel into after hours. Swollen from head to toe.

His eyes were gritty, muscles aching. He hadn't gotten to sleep much, snatching short naps on an uncomfortable bed in a motel not too far from the hospital. He'd left just to see Levi, to reassure him face-to-face because his little brother needed that. But he'd be going back there, he had to stay close to Antonio.

For Toro.

For himself, too.

He's stay to make sure his brother was out of the woods, then he'd finish this thing. No more waiting.

In Levi's living room, he accepted a beer and sank onto the couch with a sigh.

"Talk to me," Levi said. He sat opposite Daniel, leaning forward expectantly. He was scared, Daniel saw it on his face. Levi didn't hide his vulnerabilities, must be a side effect of not growing up with their father.

"He was ambushed in his cell." Daniel stared at the beer in his hand as he recounted what he'd learned from Syren, his go-between with the Feds. As much as Daniel hated to admit it, especially coming after Syren's betrayal, the man was invaluable. "It is suspected the guards were in on it as well." He drew in a breath, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Levi sat back, eyes filled with sorrow. He'd never met Antonio, and yet here he sat, worrying over him in the same way as Daniel. Family was family in the end, no?

"What will you do?" Van sat next to Levi. His expression was different. This ex Fed, he understood the thirst for blood and revenge. And he knew, judging from his cautious gaze, what Daniel was about to say next.

"I'll handle it."

"Alone?" Levi asked. "Do you even know who's behind this?" He reached over, grabbing Daniel's free hand as he shook his head. "Doesn't

matter. You can’t do this by yourself.”

Even being married to a man like Donovan Cintron, Levi remained naïve to the game. “Alone is the best way to do most things, hermanito,” he said. “I have been doing that way for a long time.” He would continue to do it that way. “When I leave here, I won’t return,” he told Levi sternly.

His little brother jerked as if Daniel had landed a physical blow. “You can’t do that.”

“Do you want to know why I’ve made myself untouchable? Why I’m suddenly back in the light, walking the streets instead of being locked up alongside Antonio? It’s not because I haven’t done every single thing they accuse me of.” He shifted closer, sitting right on the edge of the couch as he stared into Levi’s eyes. “There’s a silent threat hanging over their heads, a threat that I’ll kill everyone they love and leave them alive just to experience that pain. That guilt.”

The shock in Levi’s gaze hurt him deep inside, but his brother had a right to know who he was. What he was capable of, and why in the end he had to disappear again. He ignored Van’s glare, and continued.

“It works, because to them I have no one to live for. Nothing to lose.” But that wasn’t true at all, was it? “I went from having no one to having you and Toro and—” Stavros’ face flashed in his mind. “I knew better,” he admitted grimly. “But there’s nothing like the draw of the warmth of family to make you want to come in from the cold.”

“Daniel—”

He held up a hand with a shake of his head. “You need to not be my brother, because being my brother means things will happen to you. Like what Stavros did. Like what’s happening with Antonio.” He looked to Van. He’d understand and he’d make Levi get it. “Your family comes first. It must come before my wanting to have you in my life. I can’t have you in my life and keep you safe. I must choose.”

“No.” Levi jumped to his feet.

“Babe, listen to him.” Van grabbed Levi’s hand, holding him in place. “He’s right.”

“I don’t accept that.” Levi jerked Van’s hand away. Familiar stubbornness glinted in his brown eyes. Their mother’s eyes. He stared down at Daniel. “Van, give us a minute.”

Van did, stroking a soothing hand down Levi’s back, murmuring into his ear something too low for Daniel to hear then walking out the room. The

love Van obviously had for Levi was a tangible thing, which made it possible for Daniel to accept the man in his brother's life after everything he'd done to hurt Levi.

When Van disappeared from view, Levi sat back down. Gaze heavy on Daniel's face, he asked, "What about Stavros, are you walking away from him, too?"

Stavros was the very last thing Daniel wanted to discuss. He'd forced himself to focus on nothing but Antonio since he left Stavros sated and rumpled in his bed, refusing to break down and contact him even though he wanted to. So very badly.

"Answer me," Levi said sharply.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "Does that tone work on your husband?"

"Yes."

"Then use it on him. I am not talking about Stavros."

Levi regarded him for countless moments. "You care for him."

Daniel cared about the abused animals they showed on the late night infomercials. He cared about the impending storm that might impede his flight back to California. What he felt for the man who'd put his wife in her grave and lifted Daniel up out of his was impossible to explain. He didn't bother trying.

"Daniel."

Something in the way Levi said his name reminded him of Stavros. The way he stared at Daniel with everything vulnerable in his eyes. He shot to his feet.

"Sí. I am walking away from him, too." Disappointment filtered through Levi's gaze, and Daniel frowned. "What is it?"

"Just…" Levi shrugged. "He's good for you."

Daniel barked a rusty laugh. "The man who killed my wife. Who kidnapped you? That man? You think he is good for me?" How did that make sense? How could it be true?

"He gets you."

"He touches me with hands stained red with my wife's blood." His voice got all gritty, like loose rocks sliding over each other. Just as rough. He tried to make Levi understand what Daniel still couldn't. "His eyes, they're the last thing she saw. And when he looks at me, I disappear." He knew his gaze was pleading as he looked at his brother, probably hoping Levi could make sense of what Daniel couldn't. "Her absence created this

deep black hole inside me.” Hand on his chest, he told Levi, “But his presence makes that hole not so big. Or deep. Or dark.”

A small smile touched Levi’s face. “You love him.”

Did he? “He is—” His voice broke and he glanced away, failing at an attempt to compose himself. “He is my want, and my need, and my danger.”

“Yet you want to walk away.”

He met Levi’s gaze again. Whispered, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s easier.” The cold coil of dread in his gut put doubt to those words, but he knew better. He’d experienced it before. “Because I cannot lose again.”

“Daniel.”

“Because I’m afraid that what I feel for him might burn brighter, hotter, than what I felt for her.” Simply the thought of that threatened to put him on his knees. She deserved better. After everything he’d put her through, all the ways in which he’d betrayed her, she deserved better. Daniel gathered himself and patted Levi on the cheek before pulling him into an embrace. “It is better like this.”

For whom, he didn’t yet know. But it had to be true.

Levi’s arms came up to wrap around him.

Daniel kissed his temple, then whispered. “You have our mother’s eyes. And her soul.”

Levi made a wet sound and clung to him. Daniel clung right back. Their mother had instilled a love of family in the two sons she raised. Maybe ironic since she’d hidden a pregnancy, birth and their third son from her husband, but Daniel knew it was that sense of family that drove her actions. She wanted more for them than the life their father offered.

She’d succeeded with Levi. He was the best of the Nieto brothers, but she’d never know that. Levi would never know her. That last part had Daniel hugging his brother because he’d thought—

He slapped Levi’s back then released him as he cleared his throat. “I will have someone keep you up to date on Antonio.”

Levi blinked red-rimmed eyes at him. “Okay.” He nodded. “Yeah.”

Despite the difficulty of walking away from his brother, Daniel smiled at him as Van walked back into the room. “I’m proud of you. Antonio is, too. Our mother—” His voice broke when Levi’s chin trembled. “She would be too.”

“Everything okay?” Van glanced at Levi then frowned. “Babe, what—” He clutched Levi, and Daniel took that as his time to exit.

“Take care of him,” he told Van. He left as Levi turned into his husband’s embrace.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Stavros strode into the condo, yanking on his tie to loosen it as Bruce kept pace with him. “Any word from Tennyson?” He went straight to the bottle of whiskey he hadn’t quite managed to finish last night, opened it and put it to his lips. He wasn’t even pretending anymore. He turned to Bruce and found his bodyguard’s concerned gaze on him. He ignored it. “Well?”

“Ah.” Bruce cleared his throat and nodded. “Renzo Vega was attacked inside his club. Tennyson says he’s been shot.”

“Huh.” He took another mouthful of the liquor. “Is he dead?”

“She doesn’t know yet. He’s disappeared.”

He pulled his phone from his jacket and called his uncle.

“Stav, what is it?”

“Renzo Vega has been shot.”

“By us?”

He chuckled. “No, but we have an opportunity. Let’s move.” He wanted Renzo Vega’s club and the other businesses the man owned that he didn’t think people knew about. Stavros knew, and he wanted them all.

“You know he’s not going down without a fight,” his uncle warned.

“He’s already down from what I hear. Let’s make sure he stays that way.”

“Well then, I’ll send some men to Atlanta.”

“Keep me informed.” He hung up then turned to Bruce. “Contact Tennyson. Tell her our men are on the way.” He’d been biding his time, staying out of Renzo Vega’s way, waiting for the right time to make his

move. He didn’t care who went after the man, all he knew was that they gave him an opening, and he was nothing if not an opportunistic bastard.

As Bruce spoke into his phone, Stavros’ intercom buzzed. He reached over and pressed it to speak to the guard downstairs. “Yes, Vlad.” He’d fired the last guard after the last incident with Daniel. Who Stavros was not thinking about, damn it.

“You have a visitor, sir.” Vlad cleared his throat while somebody mumbled in the background. “Says to tell Diablo he’s here?”

“Send him up.” He turned away, anticipation making his pulse jump. He went into his office and sat at his desk, staring at the security cameras down in the lobby. He didn’t see Daniel, so he switched to the cameras in the elevator.

He was there. Gaze straight ahead, dressed in a black shirt and pants, under a knee-length wool coat that hung open, the collar turned up.

Hands in his pockets.

He looked grim. Severe.

More than a week since Stavros had seen or heard from him. Not that he cared. But he sat atop his desk, body already tight, cock already hard. Every time he gave in to the invisible force that pulled at them, it got harder and harder to push back. To get away from it. He had to, he knew that. But Daniel Nieto was all of Stavros’ vices rolled into one dangerous sonofabitch.

That made Daniel his new favorite drug.

That made him irresistible.

When the elevator stopped, he walked out of his office just as Bruce gave a shout.

“What the fuck?”

Daniel stood feet away, face inscrutable, jaw covered in more than two days’ worth of gray stubble as he stared at Bruce, and the gun Bruce held pointed at him.

“Bruce.”

“Sir, he just walked in.” Bruce’s gaze flicked to Stavros then back to Daniel. “I don’t—”

“Go away, Bruce.”

His bodyguard jerked then stared at Stavros, shock on his face. “Sir?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” Under both men’s intense gazes, Stavros waited calmly until Bruce lowered the gun. After one last confused

glance at Stavros, Bruce walked to the elevator and got on.

Daniel didn't seem to blink.

He frustrated Stavros. Angered and confused him too. Once they were alone, he turned away, grabbing the bottle of whiskey. "Drink?"

"No."

Well, at least he was using his words, right? As growly and fucked as that one word sounded. He closed his eyes briefly before turning back to his guest. "How is your brother?" Fuck small talk. He put the whiskey to his lips, watching Daniel's gaze flick over him.

An extra layer of tension hung between them. The raw hunger, the guilt and the pain, that shit was familiar by now. But that fresh whatever weighing them down? He couldn't place it.

"Are we staring at each other all night?" he asked sharply. "Because I'm busy." He started walking away. "I have things to do."

"It needs to end."

Stavros stopped in his tracks, his back to Daniel. Something cold and devastating cloaked him in ice suddenly. Making it hard to move. "What needs to end?" The immediate effect Daniel had on him was insane. His voice was now just a shredded tone.

"This," Daniel said from close behind him. "This needs to end."

"Are you ending it?" He turned slowly. Daniel stood right there, hands still in his pockets. Smooth, he had that appearance, from his features down. But Stavros knew better. He knew everything about the man in front him was rough. Untamed.

Un-fucking-civilized.

"I am ending it."

How could those four words echo so loud and long inside of him? How could they sink so deep into his flesh and hurt so badly? "This thing, this thing we can't put a name to. This thing we can't ever seem to run from, you want to end it."

"Yes."

He tightened his hold on the bottle of whiskey, now dangerously low, and stepped forward. Crowding Daniel. "You're on my bedsheets," he told him. "The scent of you, all over my bedsheets. I could wash it, but you're also in my head. How do I fix that?" He wasn't this man. Had never been this man. But this man wanted to hold on to this. This man wanted to wrap

himself up in all of it. “You’re in my chest, my gut.” He pressed the bottle of whiskey to his stomach. “You’re inside me. How do I get you out?”

Daniel’s expression didn’t change, though his jaw ticked. He was unmoved, and Stavros didn’t know how to reach him.

“Lo siento.”

Stavros threw the whiskey with a roar, right past Daniel’s head. The bottle smashed against the closed elevator doors, spilling the last of the liquor. “I don’t want your fucking apologies.” Jesus Christ. Who was he anymore? “There is no forgiveness,” he said hoarsely. “What we’ve done, what we did to each other. There is no forgiveness.”

“Sí.”

He sounded so grave, Stavros wanted to go to him. Touch him. Soothe him. But what about the ache inside him? Was Daniel the one to soothe him? “I want to be selfish.” He tipped his head upward. “I can be selfish.” The impending loss spread through him, turning his words into the harshest of whispers. Torn from deep inside. From that deep space—unknown to him before now—occupied by Daniel. “I want to ask for more, but I won’t because I already know what you have to offer…” He looked into Daniel’s eyes that gave away nothing. That gave him nothing. “Half of your heart won’t do.”

Plus Stavros had already taken so much.

Though he didn’t speak, the expression on Daniel’s face said the same thing. Stavros had already taken so much.

“Go. It’s done. It’s over.” He gave Daniel his back, slumping over the bar, eyes squeezed tightly closed. He’d fucked it all up, too blind to notice just how fast and far he’d been falling.

Ice gripped his chest, the cold shocking a gasp from him. This was loss, shaking his body and rattling his teeth. This was heartbreak, the searing pain that made his entire being curl in on itself. This was pain.

Daniel Nieto had finally broken him.

A hand settled on his shoulder and he yanked himself away, but Daniel caught him. They were fighting, scrambling. Daniel pulling him, and Stavros struggling to get away from it. From him.

It hurt. Jesus. It hurt.

Daniel managed to get him face to face, and fisted his tie, choking him. Stavros swung at him, hitting him in the jaw. Then Daniel’s mouth was on him, biting, tongue shoving in. Bringing the taste of blood.

Stavros shook at that taste of him, and he opened wider. Wanting more. Asking for it. Daniel fucked his mouth hard, eating him up, panting as he tore at Stavros' clothes, ignoring his shirt in favor of unbuckling his pants and shoving them down his hips.

Stavros brought his hands to Daniel's crotch, gripping him through his pants, squeezing him. God. He was on fire. Anger and lust burning through him. Daniel finished opening his own pants and shoved Stavros face-first into the bar.

Hand at his nape, forcing him down.

Down.

He went, because he wanted this. One last shot at this. One last taste of it. One last everything before he went back to who he used to be. Who he was supposed to be before Daniel Nieto came and tore him open.

Fingers pushed into him. Hard, slamming deep.

Pain.

"Fuck." He convulsed, but didn't hide from it. "More."

Wet fingers fucked him, fast. Furious. They branded him, inside and out. Daniel's grip on the tie around Stavros' neck, pulling tight, cutting off his breathing as he struggled for air.

Struggled.

Daniel liked when he struggled.

The fingers disappeared. Then Daniel was there, knuckles brushing Stavros' ass, smooth blunt head at his hole.

He slammed in.

"Oh God." Stavros jerked, flailing, arms knocking over the bottle of liquor on that bar. Everything rattled around as Daniel fucked him.

Fast.

Like it was a race. As if they had an expiration date, which they did. As if they were in danger of getting caught.

Smack of the skin on skin.

Their grunts.

Numb fingers gripping the edge of the bar, Stavros fucked him just as hard. Pushing back on him, opening himself up for that cock to sink deep.

Then pull out.

Over and over.

The pounding rattled his bones.

He kept his eyes closed, feeling everything, tasting it on his tongue. Daniel didn’t want to be there. Stavros wouldn’t keep him where he didn’t want to stay. So when they were done, he’d be alone.

Daniel would go back to his dead wife.

That last thought ached something awful. He jerked away, and Daniel pulled out of him, stumbling back. Stavros faced him and found Daniel still wore his clothes, everything on, except for his pants that were around his knees.

Eyes wild. Nostrils flared. Lips swollen and cut on the bottom.

Maybe it happened the first time Daniel took his blade to Stavros’ flesh. Or when he’d fed Stavros his own blood from that knife. However it happened, Stavros had fallen in love with Daniel Nieto. Now he had to let him go.

He’d had him on loan, after all.

He kicked off his pants then walked away stripping as he went, into his bedroom. Not looking back to see if Daniel followed. He did, Stavros felt him, warm and restless at his back. Then his hand went around Stavros’ neck, gripped the tie.

Wrapping it around his fist.

Using it to control Stavros’ movements, bringing them face to face. He’d also undressed, and he stood there in front of Stavros wearing nothing but tributes to his dead wife on his skin. A walking memorial to her, etched in ink. Stavros closed his eyes at the sight of her name on Daniel’s chest.

Impossible.

They’d always been impossible.

A jerk on the tie brought him nose to nose with Daniel, and Stavros’ eyes flew open as Daniel’s mouth descended on his again. Taking him again with desperation, every swipe of his tongue stealing away pieces of who Stavros thought himself to be.

He couldn’t say no. Couldn’t turn away. Everything about this was necessary, even the restriction around his neck, denying him an easy breath. Daniel panted into his mouth, tongue delving deep.

Stavros clawed at him, striving to leave his own marks behind. He took two steps and they fell onto the bed, Daniel on the bottom, Stavros on top, writhing. Riding him.

Grinding.

Their cocks pressed together, hips jerking as they rubbed against each other. Daniel moaned, body vibrating under Stavros. He took control, breaking the kiss, lips skating down Daniel's throat.

Kissing his scars.

Daniel let go of the tie to cup Stavros' nape, fingers dipping into his hair, pulling. Tugging. Stavros made his way downward. Biting nipples. Just plain biting. Tasting skin.

One last journey.

One last time.

He straddle Daniel, one hand on the other man's chest, the other wrapped around his cock. Bringing it to his entrance. Staring into Daniel's eyes, eyelids weighted down with lust.

With regret.

With more.

Stavros rejected that notion of more.

He lifted up, rubbing against the cock at his hole, until Daniel's fingers rake down his front.

"Ugh." He sank down on it, cursing, panting. "Fuck. Fuck."

"Stavros." Daniel yanked him down, teeth in his chin, large palm on his ass as he thrust upward.

"Unnghh." Hurt so good. Everything about Daniel hurt him so fucking good. He begged for more. More pain. It was all he knew anymore. All his body understood. Weak from all the sensations bombarding him, he clung to the sheet on either side of Daniel.

Ass open.

The tie tight at his throat cutting into his breathing.

Over and over Daniel banged into him. Stavros cried out with each stroke. Death strokes, because they killed him. Yet he didn't stop loving them. Arching into them, pushing back. Rising up and slamming down.

Until Daniel caught him around the neck and reversed their positions. Now he was on top, Stavros' back pressed into the mattress. Legs in the air. Ass filled again. Body contorted, almost folded in two. Each thrust pushed him into the headboard.

He kept his eyes on Daniel, because Daniel kept his eyes on Stavros. That gaze, fucked to darkness with wild lust and the roughest type of hunger, it touched Stavros where not even Daniel's cock could reach. So

deep inside, Stavros couldn’t handle it, not then. He twisted around, flipping onto all fours.

Knees spread wide, torso kissing the mattress. Spine curved and ass pointed to the ceiling.

He reached behind and pulled himself apart. Offering it up. “Fuck me.” He didn’t do coy. Never had. He wanted to be fucked tonight. Tomorrow was for different things. He recognized the thirst for destruction on slow leak inside him. He’d deal with it tomorrow.

Tonight, now, Daniel Nieto was taking one last piece of him.

Sucker for pain that he was, Stavros offered himself up on a silver platter.

Daniel took that offering. Slamming deep.

“God. Damn.” Stavros threw his head back. “Yess.” He hissed out his appreciation. “Just like fucking that.”

Just like that Daniel delivered his strokes. Steady and precise, hitting his gland over and over. Battering him until Stavros pitched forward, face in the pillows, cries muffled as Daniel worked him over.

His to fuck. His to torture.

Stavros had never ached so good. Never cried out so loud. Never begged so much. “Deeper. Let me feel it. Let me feel.”

Daniel came down over his back, sweaty front pressed to Stavros’ back. Mouth on his nape, panting breaths in Stavros’ ear. One of his hands shoved under Stavros and reached up, circling his throat.

He tilted his head back, gave Daniel access as those fingers closed around him.

Squeezing.

Taking his breath.

His pulse tripped over itself and that fire in his belly roared into an inferno. Flames everywhere as he burned. Breath gone. Darkness rushed in.

“Daniel.” Whatever breath he had left, he used it up to speak his name. The fingers eased up and breath came rushing back. He gulped, body jerking as he panted.

Daniel’s hips lifted off him. His dick retreated, leaving Stavros’ clenching ass.

“Don’t.” The ragged whisper hurt. “Don’t go.” For a second there, he wasn’t just talking about Daniel’s departure from his body.

Lips pressed to his ear, his temple. Simple, but Stavros couldn’t stop shaking. Trembling.

Daniel came back to him, wet dick pressing back inside.

Slowly.

Dragging along his throbbing muscles.

Reaching places. He switched it up, going slower, almost tender. Stavros contracted around him, and Daniel grunted. He reared back and drove in.

Yes. He could handle the hard stuff. The rough shit.

But Daniel didn’t seem to care because he went slowly again. So slow, taking his time to sink deep and roll his hips. Stavros pushed back onto him, trying to urge him to go for that bit of rough again.

That wildness. The breakneck, punishing pace again.

But Daniel kissed his neck.

He stretched out on top of Stavros, hands sliding down Stavros’ arms. Fingers reaching for his, clutching him. Stavros’ breath hitched.

Don’t do this.

But it was too late. Already too late. Daniel fucked him in silence. Slowly. Making sure Stavros’ destruction was complete.

Teeth grazed his skin, and without a hand on his cock he exploded. Just like that. Daniel smothering him with sweaty skin and biting kisses, their fingers twisted around each other.

A pulsing cock thrusting in and out of him.

He came shouting, bucking. Arching off the bed as he spasmsed, ass contracting painfully as sticky warmth flooded him.

Daniel climaxed with him, grunting, fingers painful around him. Stavros couldn’t stop clenching, and in response Daniel’s shaft jerked inside him. He didn’t move when Daniel finally lifted himself off and pulled out.

One last fuckup, Stavros realized, as cum rushed out of him and onto the mattress.

No protection.

There was no reason for him to feel owned, like Daniel’s possession. But he did anyway. He scrambled upright and past Daniel who watched him with hooded eyes. In the bathroom he ignored his eyes in the mirror as he splashed water on his face.

Jesus Christ.

How could he have fallen in love with Daniel Nieto? How could he let that happen? He picked up something, a soap dish, and threw it across the bathroom. Then he scrubbed a hand over his face. His body was still quaking. As he stood there, cum leaked out of him, trickling down the back of his legs.

He clenched his muscles, gritting his teeth. It was over, right? This sex, their sex didn't make a difference. He'd thought they were making progress. All those nights in that bed out there. Every day Daniel would ride that elevator to the penthouse at sunset, and he'd stay until the sun rose. Stavros thought—

Daniel wanted to put a stop to it. Stavros would give him what he wanted.

He walked out the bathroom. Daniel hadn't moved from the bed. He stared at Stavros, gaze falling lower to where his cum was probably decorating Stavros' legs. He didn't bother to look to confirm that stupid oversight.

"Stavros."

Fuck, his voice. That sound, coupled with Stavros' name, destroyed things. Bloodied things. Daniel's pulverized voice invoked memories of death and brain-numbing screams.

But still, *still* Stavros loved that voice. The way it weakened his knees and stiffened his spine. The way it flayed him open, exposing parts of him no one but Daniel ever got to see. He showed his enemy his weakness.

Now Daniel was walking away, armed with Stavros' heart.

"You don't have to worry," he managed not to sound as shattered as he truly was. "You're safe." He swiped a hand through the cum on the back of his thigh and held it up, palm to Daniel. "You're—You're safe."

"I am—"

"You can go now." He fisted his hands at his sides. Hardening himself against another pathetic apology. Ripping off the fucking emotional Band-Aid. The pain—he'd say he'd been through worse, but he refused to let Daniel turn him into a liar. "You and those lies you tell yourself. Take them with you." He strode over to his bedroom window, looking out at nothing.

Waiting.

Waiting for the creak of the mattress. For the sound of clothes sliding against skin, and the jangle of belt buckles. For steady footsteps that got farther and farther away. And finally for the sound of his private elevator.

Then he allowed the grief and his fucked-weak knees to take him to the floor.

He'd been left before. Had his heart broken, too. That blow had never tossed him on his ass before now. That blow had never hollowed out his chest before today.

This love.

This loss.

Daniel Nieto.

Together they slaughtered him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Hermano."

Daniel jerked upright, almost toppling his chair as he stared at his brother. Antonio's head was all bandaged up, face still puffy and red, sticky and glistening with whatever ointment the nurses used on his wounds. Left arm in a cast, right hand handcuffed to the bed, Antonio turned swollen eyes to the guards visible through the door, before he frowned at Daniel.

"What are you doing here?" Antonio's voice was hoarse with censure and pain.

"How do you feel?" Daniel ignored the question as he stood, stretching out the kinks in his back and neck as he went to his brother, sitting on the bed gingerly. "Shall I call a nurse?"

"Contéstame." Antonio's gaze flipped back and forth from the heavily guarded door to Daniel. "Are you fucking crazy?"

He shouldn't have come, that was what his brother was trying so eloquently to say. But that wasn't going to work with Daniel. Not now. He bent forward to meet Antonio's furious gaze. "Who was it?" he asked.

Antonio's gaze went blank. "Get away from here."

He smiled, cupping his brother's face gently. "You do not protect me," he snarled. "I protect you. That is my job. I protect you, so I ask again: Who?"

Antonio's jaw tightened but he kept silent.

Daniel wanted to shake him, but he sighed instead. "I have leverage on all the right people." Which was why Antonio was in this state of the art private medical facility here in LA, and not in the regular hospital they'd

originally taken him. Dealing with Syren had its upside at times. “Tell me who,” he pleaded. “Tell me and I’ll have it handled.”

Antonio licked his lips. “Doesn’t matter. The only way I’m safe is to get out.”

Try as hard as he could, that was the one thing Daniel couldn’t accomplish. “’Tonio, give me names.”

“I am alive,” Antonio said. “They don’t want me dead. If they did I would be.”

Daniel straightened, watching his brother’s face closely. He got nothing. “Who is they?”

“It’s a warning, hermano.” Antonio’s mouth crooked into a weak grimace. “How many times have we delivered those, huh?”

None. At least for Daniel. He didn’t do warnings. If it warranted a warning, it warranted punishment. And his type of punishment was death. He didn’t see fear in Antonio’s eyes. Maybe his brother was hiding it, but Daniel didn’t think so. What he spied—before Antonio smothered it—was a weariness.

A yearning for surrender.

An acceptance of what was, and what would be.

He frowned, not understanding it. Refusing to believe it. “Antonio, háblame.” *Talk to me*. “I will take back our home,” he vowed. “For us, for Petra—”

“Did you do it? Did you get Konstantinou?”

Daniel stiffened. Before Antonio got locked up, Daniel had shared his plans of going after Stavros.

“Did you make him pay for what he did to you, to us?”

He’d managed what, fifteen minutes? No thinking about Stavros and the cold gaze he’d turned on Daniel when he’d ordered him gone.

He’d planned on leaving, yes.

He hadn’t planned on them ending up in bed. Maybe he’d hoped. Maybe he’d hungered. But it had been no plan, and in the aftermath he’d had to walk away.

The most difficult walk of his recollection, those twenty-seven steps from Stavros’ bedroom to the elevator.

Was it done? Could it ever be done?

“No.” He held Antonio’s gaze. “It will never be done.” Amid the questions staring up at him, he said simply, “Some things have changed.”

“What?”

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t tell his brother that while Daniel had been out there, intent on getting back the home he’d had with Petra, that Stavros Konstantinou was becoming dangerously close to being it.

Being home.

“We have an agreement,” Daniel told him instead. “Konstantinou and I have reached a truce.”

Antonio scowled. “You trust it?”

“I trust him.”

Antonio’s incredulous laugh quickly turned into a cough, with him gasping for breath. “You trust no one,” he rasped. “Brother, you barely trust me, and I’m your blood.” His eyes narrowed. “What are you really up to?”

“Nothing for you to concern yourself over.” He stood, waving away anything else his brother would have said. It wasn’t as if Daniel hadn’t spoken the same words to himself ever since this thing with Stavros began. “I need you to get well. That is most important.”

“The business,” Antonio murmured. “We should be running it. It belongs to us.” He tried to sit up, groaning, pain sharpening his features before he gave up and settled back against the pillows. “That leverage you have, use it, hermano. Get me out of here so we can get our legacy back.”

“I can’t do that.” Maybe if he didn’t have the responsibility of *her*. Maybe if he still harbored that death wish, he could give his brother what he wanted. But Daniel didn’t want to go back. He couldn’t. “My leverage doesn’t go that far.”

But it could. If he wanted.

Licking his split lip, Antonio jerked a nod. Though stark disappointment remained in his eyes, he didn’t voice it. Instead he changed the subject. “Toro?”

Daniel shrugged with a small smile. “He is your son, which means he is very much like you. Except he follows direction.”

The happiness his words brought to Antonio’s eyes softened Daniel the tiniest bit. He could never understand why Antonio never claimed his son. Why he never gave Toro the Nieto name. Why he deprived his own flesh and blood his love and his time. But watching his brother now, Daniel had no doubt that Antonio cared for Toro.

“Keep him safe.” Antonio’s lashes dropped as he pleaded with Daniel. “Keep my son safe.”

“I will.” Daniel leaned over him, patting Antonio’s face. “Rest. I will watch over you.” He stayed there with his brother, until Antonio succumbed to the medication and fell back asleep.

Daniel hated the useless feeling that gripped him. He was a man of action, but there was nothing to be done except sit and watch Antonio get better on his own. He couldn’t fix his brother, but he for sure could find out who was behind the attack and make them pay.

“I’m not sending you out there.” Christophe looked Stavros up and down, a frown on his face. “You’re not in the right space.”

“Right space?” Stavros lurched upright from his previous position of reclining his chair, legs propped up on his desk. “Theíos, this is not a request. I need an assignment.” Preferably one that took him out of the country. He needed to put distance between himself and all the fucking memories of Daniel Nieto that had him flying into murderous rages.

“What have you done?” Christophe crossed his arms. “What do we need to fix?”

He’d expected that question. Still, hearing it made Stavros flinch. His uncle would be the one to help clean up his messes as a teenager and young adult, before he’d learned to handle his shit himself. Before he’d learned how to go it alone. He’d fuck shit up, it was what he did. The one thing he was good at. Only this time... “I didn’t do anything.”

Christophe watched him closely. “Then why are you running away?”

For most of his life, Stavros had wished his father had seen him the way Christophe did. The way his uncle knew him.

“Is this about Nieto?”

Wasn’t everything about Daniel? Wasn’t Stavros’ sleepless nights all about Daniel? Wasn’t the fact that he’d cut off all personal entanglements with Bruce all about Daniel? “No.”

“Just like you leaving the family to go work in Africa wasn’t about you running from Annika?”

“Don’t,” he snapped. “Don’t bring her up.” He hadn’t thought about Annika in so long.

“Stavros.” Christophe sighed as he stepped closer to the desk. He leaned forward, planting both palms down on the flat surface as he glared at

Stavros. “You feel for him. Now you’re running from it, just like you ran from Annika.”

What right did he have to want that man after he took so much from him? “Just give me a job, theíos.” He held Christophe’s gaze, chin stubbornly tilted.

Much like his uncle’s.

“Does he blame you?” Christophe asked softly. “Does he put it all on you the way things went down?”

“Of course he blames me.” The words were biting as they flew from his mouth, but Christophe didn’t flinch. “I killed his wife. I killed her. I took her from him. And he blames me. He hates me.”

“But that doesn’t stop him from sleeping with you.”

Stavros snorted. “It did. He walked away. So I need— It’s different. I have to stop feeling like this.”

“You’re going against your true nature, boy. Retreat isn’t you.” Christophe straightened, and stared him down. “You don’t back down.”

But he had to. He’d done enough to disrupt Daniel’s life. “I’m going to Lisbon tonight,” he told his uncle. “If you have any assignments in that part of the world, I’m taking it.” Despite allowing his uncle to run the operation, Stavros was still the one in charge.

“You want an assignment, I have one for you.” Christophe pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and tapped it a few times before holding it out to Stavros. “Here. Your new assignment.”

Daniel’s face stared back at Stavros. He was younger, but his eyes were still that deadly dark. The shape of his mouth hard and cruel. “What is this?”

“There’s a bounty on his head. You said you wanted an assignment.” Christophe shrugged.

Stavros got up and grabbed the phone. “Felipe Guzmán did this?” That fucker was a dead man walking.

“Don’t know, but I heard someone else has already taken the job.” Christophe’s gaze was steady on his face. “I’m sure you won’t let that stop you.”

“Who?”

“Not sure. But our sources think The Perez Boys were behind the prison ambush of Antonio Nieto.”

Fuck. They were coming at Daniel from all sides.

He dropped back into his seat. Two weeks since he last saw Daniel, and fuck him, but Stavros wanted to see him again. He'd kept tabs on Antonio's situation, so he knew the man was still alive, but that was as much as he knew. He stared down at the photo on the phone's small screen. Daniel's eyes pierced him, touching the dark places.

Fucking magic.

He'd been prepared to walk away from it. He'd easily accepted Daniel's decision as if the bastard spoke for them both, when he didn't. Not on that, he didn't.

"Tell me what you said when I decided to go to Africa." He didn't look up at Christophe as he stroked a finger over the image on the screen. "Tell me what you said."

"Feelings aren't something you run from," Christophe answered softly. "You bring them with you wherever you go."

Stavros had learned that all too well.

"Stay and fight for what you want." Christophe's words echoed in his head, back then and now.

"Fight for it. Earn it. And keep it," he repeated the words back to his uncle and the other man smiled sadly. Stavros hadn't appreciated the words as a young man. Staying around Annika had felt impossible, and self-control had never been something he'd familiarized himself with.

He still had no self-control to speak of, but being without Daniel felt impossible. As improbable as them being together. Did he want that?

"Anipsiós."

"Syren Rua." He handed the phone back to Christophe. "Arrange a meeting. As soon as possible."

"Is that wise?" Christophe's eyes narrowed. "Do you trust him?"

"No. But he can get me what I want."

"And what will you do in the meantime?" Christophe asked.

"I'm sure I'll come up with something."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Felipe Guzmán had the oiliest smile Stavros had ever seen on a human being, and he had to actively keep from punching the man in the face when he turned that fucked up gesture in his direction.

They sat poolside at Stavros' rooftop pool, both of them flanked by their men. Felipe didn't hesitate when Stavros placed the call to set up a meet, nor did he put up a fight when Stavros offered his own place for the occasion.

Men like Felipe, Stavros understood them. His father had been a man like that, and while he'd loved his father, rarely did Stavros ever like him. He had no such familial bond with the man who sat opposite him now, legs crossed at the ankles, sipping on Stavros' twenty-year old cognac.

"Didn't think I'd hear from you again, Konstantinou." Felipe watched him over the rim of his glass. "I made other arrangements."

"Did you?" Stavros brought his gaze to the skyline over in the distance, steadily stirring the drink in his hand. "That's a shame."

"I'm sure I can find some other way you can make up for what you took from my family."

Stavros bit back the chuckle. Nothing the clueless bastard came up with could ever come close to the loss of Daniel. Too bad Felipe wouldn't get the chance to try. "Why do you want Daniel dead so badly?"

"I never wanted him with Petra."

Her name landed like a kick to the face, but Stavros shook off the blow and returned his gaze to Felipe.

“He took her away from us, her family. Isolated her, and led her to her death.” With each word Felipe spoke, his voice got louder, his face redder. “Now, he wants to come back and take even more from me.”

Stavros cocked his head. “He wants back into the business?” He hadn’t expected that, but he should have. Daniel grew up in that life. Made sense he’d want to go back to it.

“He wants what’s mine.” Felipe pounded his chest, spilling the expensive-ass whisky. “That will not happen.”

“So you put a bounty out on him.”

“You were taking too long to bring me his head.”

“Of course.” Stavros inclined his head. “My apologies.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly in an attempt to rein in his temper. “Let’s talk business.”

“Lets.”

“Cancel the hit on Daniel, and I’ll do it myself. Free of charge.”

Felipe laughed, a big roiling sound that made his entire body quiver. “You’re too late.” He tossed back the last of his drink and slammed the glass down on the table between them. “Besides, I already paid your cost with my sister’s blood.”

Fingers tight around his glass, Stavros pursed his lips. He’d been going for civilized. Trying to keep his emotions out of it. But that wasn’t going to work. Felipe Guzman was a threat.

To Daniel.

To Stavros.

“I’d hoped you’d be reasonable.” He got to his feet, the near empty bottle of liquor in his grip. As Felipe gazed up at him with narrowed eyes, Stavros smashed the bottle against the table. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Stavros struck. Stabbing him in the throat with the jagged glass.

Blood spurted.

Felipe’s eyes went wide and he jerked, grasping at his throat as blood flowed.

“Just because my guns have been checked at the door doesn’t mean I’m not still armed.” This, he didn’t mind this. Behind him, a shout went up then a few soft *pfft pffts* sounded as his man handled Felipe’s two bodyguards.

Arrogance would lead a man like Felipe to think himself untouchable. Arrogance would make him walk into Stavros’ lair without fucking head-

to-toe armor. Arrogance kept Stavros in business.

He waited beside Felipe as the man gurgled his last breaths away then Stavros turned to Bruce. “I want his head.” He stepped over the bodies of Felipe’s fallen guards and headed downstairs to shower and change.

He had a meeting to get to.

“Mr. Konstantinou, you called?”

Stavros closed his eyes briefly as Syren slid into the chair opposite him. He’d arranged for their meeting to take place in neutral territory. A restaurant about a dozen blocks from his place.

He had to give it to Syren, the man was prompt. And per usual, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit. This one—vest and pants—charcoal gray. The shirt was a subtle black and white pattern, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

Before either of them could speak again, their waiter appeared. Stavros ordered a scotch. Syren opted for water. Stavros waved the waiter off then refocused on Syren.

The other man smiled at him. “Something you need?”

Obviously. Otherwise they wouldn’t be where they were. “Where is he?”

One of Syren’s eyebrows shot up. “Who?”

“I’m not in the mood for games.” Stavros leaned forward. “There’s a bounty on his head, did you know that?”

“You dealt with Guzmán so now you plan on tossing your hat into the ring?” Syren sipped his water, seemingly unconcerned.

Stavros narrowed his eyes. “You already know?” That happened two hours ago, for fuck’s sake.

“Not a lot happens in the criminal underworld that I’m not aware of.” Syren smiled at him slowly. “Feel free to test that theory.”

“Does he know?”

Syren shrugged. “He’s…busy at the moment.”

Fuck. Stavros curled his fists, nails biting into his palm. “Is he all right?” He had to be. He was Daniel fucking Nieto. Hard to kill. But the fear inside Stavros sat cold and heavy on his chest.

“You think he can’t handle himself?”

Stavros grasped either sides of the table with both hands and lurched forward. “I know there’s a fucking bounty on his head, and if anything happens to him there will be hell to pay.”

Syren watched him, his unusually colored eyes giving nothing away. “Relax. Our mutual friend has it covered.”

Relax. Fucking relax?

He’d heard things about the man seated opposite him, but Stavros had never paid them much credence. After the way Syren had stolen him away from Daniel’s captivity, and the many ways in which he kept popping up like a bad penny, maybe the question should be asked… “Who are you? Really?”

“Who am I really?” Syren smiled. “I’m the kind of bullet you want in your gun.”

There was nothing sinister about him, yet that in itself was ominous. Stavros sat back, gaze narrowed as he tried to figure out Syren’s play. “You’ve made yourself indispensable to whole lot of powerful men, making you even more powerful than they are.” He could respect that. Ruthlessness was a talent he felt should always be nurtured.

“Does it make you want to come after me? You want that power for yourself?” Syren cocked his head, one eyebrow raised. Nonchalant. Cool as a fan. “My family, the one I’d die for? My family is made up of some of the most dangerous men you’ve never heard of. I’m seven killers deep.” He grinned, flipping a strand of white-blond hair from his forehead. “If you survive them, which I know you won’t, you get to tangle with me.” He shook his head, an almost pitying expression flitting across his pretty face. “No one wants to tangle with me, especially not you.”

Stavros grinned. He might actually like this man. “I like a challenge, and death isn’t something that scares me. You bring your killers, and I bring mine. Any time.”

Syren nodded. “What do you want?”

“I want Daniel’s location.”

“Last I heard, you two had a mutual parting of ways.” Syren’s gaze scanned the room before coming back to Stavros. “Can’t take no for an answer?”

“No.”

“Good man.” Syren’s teeth appeared then he sobered. “You want something. I want something. We should do business.”

Stavros held his gaze over the rim of his glass. “Name your price.”

“Renzo Vega is off limits.”

“That’s not up for discussion.” He had plans for Renzo Vega, and they’d been set in motion.

“Wrong.” This time Syren was the one to lean forward. “It is the only thing up for discussion. You want Daniel, you back away from Renzo.”

The liquor slid down Stavros’ throat, smoky smooth. He savored that touch as he watched Syren. “Renzo Vega is your price?” The club owner’s worth tripled immediately.

“Choose. Power or love. Daniel or Renzo. You can’t have both,” Syren told him. “There’s no space in your life for both, so choose.” He licked his lips. “And if for some stupidly self-destructive reason you choose Renzo, I will personally make it so you have neither one.”

Stavros chuckled. “Interesting.” He looked up from the swirling liquid in his glass. “Who is Renzo Vega to you?”

Syren’s purple eyes flashed. “Renzo is my business. Daniel is yours.” He smirked. “Unless you’re still in denial. In which case, snap out of it already.”

Stavros tossed back the last of his drink then pushed his chair back and stood. On his way to the exit, he stopped next to Syren. “Any price you named…” He shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “I would have paid it. Anything you wanted, I would have given it.”

Syren tilted his head back, exposing his throat. “I know.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"I imagine this was not the way you expected your day to end." There was a certain level of respect Daniel experienced as he stared down at the man before him. Plastic zip ties around his wrists bound behind the back of the chair. Ropes kept his would-be killer's ankles together.

Hector the Hitman they called him in certain circles. Average height and build, shaggy dark brown hair that covered his ears and reached his collar, now soaked with sweat and blood. Hector's eyes, they were narrowed and trained on Daniel as a thin trail of blood trickled down from his left temple and onto the gray tape over his mouth.

"Always make sure your prey isn't expecting your arrival," Daniel murmured. "They should never see you coming." He smiled when Hector's nostrils flared. "I hope you got hazard pay."

Over in the corner, Toro snorted.

Hector grunted, the sound muffled by the tape. He wriggled his shoulders, struggling against his bonds, eyes flashing, signaling his anger. Daniel suspected all that was for show, because Hector had to know…

His death was a sure thing.

Daniel didn't have to do anything more than sit back and wait for Hector to make his move. He'd shadowed Daniel from LA to Atlanta without knowing Toro was on his tail. Until it was too late. Together Daniel and Toro had turned the tables on the gun-for-fire, overpowering him, knocking him out, and bringing him here, to the abandoned house in the middle of Atlanta.

A place he could conduct this business in peace, offered up by Syren Rua. The Brazilian was all kinds of helpful, wasn't he? Daniel suspected Syren had been the one to give Stavros the folder on Toro and Levi. The manipulations should anger him, but he didn't have the strength for that.

All night he'd been here, keeping Hector awake with his blade. The constant flow of blood kept his head clear of the fog of doubt and emptiness he felt since walking away from Stavros. He'd planned to deal with Felipe once he finished with Hector. Except someone beat him to the punch.

Stavros beat him to the punch. The text had arrived via Toro's phone from Syren. An image of Felipe's severed head and the five words: "*the Greek sends his regards.*"

Felipe had needed to be handled. In truth, Daniel kept putting it off, putting it for last because of who Felipe was. Stavros spared him that, but Daniel didn't know how he truly felt about it. All he knew was that his connections to Petra were fading. All he had now were memories and her name on his body.

Felipe had been a threat.

Stavros is also a threat.

Except the kind of threat Stavros posed…Daniel welcomed it. He ached for it. He couldn't have it, though. That realization had him lurching forward, grabbing Hector by the throat.

To his credit, Hector didn't just sit there, immobile. He struggled. At least, he tried putting up a fight. Of course, he didn't know how much Daniel liked that.

"Shh." Daniel squeezed the man's throat until his eyes bulged. "Shh." He kept his tone gentle as he plunged the knife into Hector's side.

Hector tensed. Eyes widening, body shuddering.

Muffled sounds rumbled behind his covered mouth.

"Easy. Easy." Daniel curved his mouth as he stared down at him. "This is a kindness, Hector." He pulled the knife out slowly and straightened. "You lucked out, so accept it."

Hector's body shook. His throat worked. Blood soaked his side, dripping down his pale, naked skin before sliding under the waistband of his jeans, the only piece of clothing Daniel allowed him to keep.

Daniel surveyed his handiwork, gloved fingers gripping the knife he held to his side. Hector's blood coated the blade, dripping small dots onto

the floor next to Daniel's feet. The sight of blood loosened the tight grip on his chest, but not by much.

That brick sitting in his stomach wouldn't ever go away, not unless he gave up, gave in, and embraced what he struggled so hard to accept.

He needed Stavros.

The choking sounds Hector made commanded Daniel's attention, so he refocused. "You have a few minutes left," Daniel told him. "Don't fight. Let it happen, because it will." Somehow it seemed he also spoke those words to himself. He had fought, hadn't he?

Fought.

Denied.

Ran.

But those feelings, they remained with him still.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs. "Tío, we have company," Toro barked.

Daniel didn't flinch, nor did he look away from Hector. "How many?"

"One." Toro didn't sound pleased at all.

Gaze locked on Hector's, Daniel asked, "Who?"

Toro's reply came after a few heartbeats. "Konstantinou."

Somehow the name landed on Daniel's shoulders like the sharpest blow, loosening his grip on the knife. It clattered to his feet as he jerked his head back to meet Toro's censorious gaze.

His nephew didn't approve.

Petra most certainly would not have approved.

Nobody smart enough, who knew exactly the kind of man Stavros was and what he'd done, would approve.

But the cold knot in his chest from moments ago? It was now fire-hot, a gasoline soaked blaze already thawing…

Melting.

"Tráemelo." *Bring him to me.*

Toro's eyes narrowed and he stood halfway down the stairs, searching Daniel's face before he jerked a tight nod and turned away, climbing back up the way he'd come.

He'd come. Why? How had he known where Daniel would be? Syren, most likely.

Questions he'd ask later. Now, he stood silently.

Waiting.

Hector’s muffled wheezing echoed. Death was taking a mighty long time to come for that one. Maybe Daniel should put him out of his misery. He picked up the knife he’d dropped and took a step toward the slumped figure in the chair.

The stairs creaked.

Daniel froze.

Silence suddenly. Even Hector’s agonized sounds faded quickly. With his back to the entrance, Daniel felt him.

Like the sun on his nape.

Like the weight of Stavros’ body pressed to his.

Like the sweep of Stavros’ hand down his back.

Daniel felt him everywhere.

Steady footfalls echoed. Hector’s eyelids fluttered open and as Daniel watched, his gaze followed those footsteps.

“Stranger.”

Much like a rock dropped into an otherwise calm pond, Stavros’ voice rippled over Daniel’s skin. In all the ways this could be deemed wrong and a betrayal—in all the ways that this connection forced him to choose between past and present, her and him—it was *una necesidad*.

Breath and water and touch.

Necessary.

It was life.

His fingers flexed around the hilt of the knife and he turned to his left, toward the sound of that voice.

Stavros stood there, shoulders against the wall. Dressed in a white shirt under a dark unbuttoned sports jacket along with dark pants and shoes. No belt, shirt tucked into his waistband. Hands in his pockets. Ankles crossed.

Deceptively calm gaze on Daniel.

Something happened when they got in the same room. When their eyes met. When they breathed the same air. A dangerously potent something.

“Why did you come?” He’d stopped caring about his damaged voice, but this time the extra raw quality made Daniel hide a flinch.

It didn’t appear that Stavros blinked, but his mouth curved. It wasn’t a smile, though. There was a hardness in that gesture, a coldness in his eyes that would have likely sent a lesser, weaker man searching for the exits.

“You fucked up by walking away from me,” Stavros told him.

The deceivingly soft words arched between the two of them, cutting out Toro who stood like a quiet sentry at the bottom of the stairs, and the bound man off to the side, bleeding out.

Stavros pushed away from the wall and walked over slowly. So relaxed. Hands still in his pockets, gaze as hot as a cattle brand on Daniel's face. "But I fucked up more," he said when they stood chest to chest. "Letting you think distance between us was an option."

"Toro," Daniel bit out. "Leave us." He didn't check to see if his nephew moved. Instead Daniel grabbed Stavros by the throat, gloved hand slick with Hector's blood digging into him as he drove Stavros backward.

One step.

Two.

Three, and he slammed Stavros into the wall he'd been leaning against earlier.

His lover chuckled, eyelids lowered.

Daniel inhaled him, that scent of Stavros that stayed in his nostrils. Drugging.

"Diablo." He breathed the name across Stavros' lips, and it lit up the other man's eyes. Softening his features. Damn him. Damn them.

"Did you miss me?" Stavros gripped Daniel's hair, holding him just as tight. Despite Daniel's hand at his throat, Stavros bent forward until their foreheads were pressed together.

The question, it sounded innocent. Nonchalant. But those four words ripped a response from Daniel. "Sí." The low pained, guttural truth burned his throat. Seared his tongue. Still, he tightened his fingers around Stavros' throat and spoke them again. "Sí."

The smile on Stavros face wrinkled the corners of his eyes, and curved his mouth wider. Happiness and relief. They brightened him, putting a shine on the dark and dangerous that were barely concealed in the hard lines of his body and the rough calluses of his fingertips.

"Then don't fucking try to leave me again."

Daniel kissed him, hard and fast, sinking his tongue deep enough to taste that shine. Delving beyond that for the taste he craved. He didn't want the polish or the shine. He wanted the darkness. The danger. And he got it. Hot and slick on his tongue, rocking him backward. Stavros held on to him by his hair, pulling so hard as they battled the way they always did.

Chest to chest, heads angled, and mouths fused as they came together with greedy swipes. Daniel forgot the man dying mere feet away. He forgot disapproving Toro. And he accepted the guilt.

He accepted it now, because there was no other way.

No going back.

They were connected, he and Stavros. Connected by blood, by death. By guilt and betrayal too. But also by this crazy unexplainable and emotional need they had to be near each other. Touch each other. Taste each other.

Daniel tasted him now. All of him, aching to get closer, to put his bruises back on Stavros' skin. He tore his mouth away, throat tight, chest heaving. Stavros' open-mouthed pants blasted him.

As he watched, Stavros sucked his wet and swollen bottom lip into his mouth, drowsy gaze lifting past Daniel's right shoulder.

"Who's the dying dude with the judgmental eyes?"

Daniel glanced over his shoulder to find Hector's head had rolled to the right, and he was watching them with slitted eyes. "Hector the Hitman."

"Ah." Stavros lifted an eyebrow. "You're taking your time with him?"

"I was." Daniel released Stavros' throat and stroked his cheek, leaving smudges of blood behind. "But something more important came up." He peeled away the glove, dropping it to the floor as he brought two fingers to Stavros' mouth. "Wet it."

Before he finished speaking, Stavros had swallowed his fingers, eyes closed, moaning. Daniel stroked his other hand down Stavros' front, past his chest and torso, stopping only to unbutton Stavros' pants and yank the zipper down.

His lover was aroused already. But he grew harder in Daniel's grasp, crown slick with warm pre-cum that flowed freely. Flowing for Daniel. With that knowledge came immense power. Stavros sucked his fingers hard, and in turn Daniel stroked him.

Rough enough for Stavros to groan, the sound echoing around his soaked digits, making Daniel's entire being vibrate. He removed his fingers with a pop then brought them to his own mouth, sucking off Stavros' taste while holding the other man's lust-filled stare.

They were going there, to whatever lay past the point of just sex. To whatever resided on the other side of casual. Burning normal to ash. Stavros' taste spread through Daniel's bloodstream and he smiled.

It wasn’t that much of a revelation at all, to realize he’d set himself on fire to keep Stavros Konstantinou warm.

With one hand, he tugged down Stavros’ pants and underwear to just past mid-thigh. His other hand, the one with fingers slick with saliva, he brought it down and around, between ass cheeks. Stroking the tight hole waiting, already yearning for him.

He caught Stavros by the chin.

And he pressed in.

Stavros’ sharp inhalation echoed and his lashes fluttered but he didn’t close his eyes. No. He rose on tiptoe. Lips parted. Jaw flexing. He went up on his toes and then he came back down.

Slowly.

Opening just enough for Daniel’s fingers to push in.

Agonizing.

The way he immediately molded around Daniel.

Soul shattering.

The trust he gave Daniel. His life. His body. His pleasure. He trusted Daniel with it.

Daniel held all of it close, probing, delving into the molten heat of Stavros. Knuckles deep. Transfixed by the reckless perfection of it. By the simple abandon that played across Stavros’ face as he took what Daniel gave.

Out. Then in.

Daniel gave them pleasure. Stavros’ was apparent, but in that moment Daniel got his from watching Stavros. The telling lines of his body as he rose and fell around Daniel’s fingers. The guttural needy sounds that rumbled in his throat.

Through it all Stavros watched him, gaze just as greedy as the body that sucked at Daniel’s fingers.

“Diablo.” Daniel’s voice cracked. “Is this penance? Is this your penance? Because you treat me like fire. And your touch—” He swallowed, hooking the fingers inside Stavros.

His lover’s hips jerked hard, cock pressing into Daniel’s hip. “Daniel.” Stavros’ voice vibrated in time with his body.

“Your touch kills me,” Daniel confessed through the thickness in his throat. “It’s the sweetest murder, and I want it again and again.” Fingers crooked, he went deep in search of that knot.

Stroking it.

“God.” Stavros fisted Daniel’s shirt, yanking him closer than they already were. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his head followed, banging against the wall. “I don’t— Please.” His throat convulsed. “Daniel. Please.”

Knuckles pressed to his prostate, Daniel gave Stavros his release.

“Fuck!”

And his commitment.

As hot cum poured into his palm, and tight muscles squeezed his fingers, Daniel swept back into his mouth.

Taking him again.

Tasting him again.

Gentler than before, but not too soft, and when Stavros’ body eased up on the shaking, Daniel pulled out of him and slid down his body.

“Daniel.” Stavros caught his nape, staring down at him.

Daniel pressed his lips to the inside of Stavros’ right knee, resting his forehead against his lover for a moment as he breathed. It wasn’t easier to do that, of course not. But it wasn’t as difficult as it once was. It didn’t ache so badly.

Trembling fingers tunneled through his hair, and under his lips tremors still made Stavros shudder.

“Soy todo tuyo,” he whispered the words into Stavros’ skin. He hooked an arm around Stavros’ thigh and lifted his head, meeting those eyes. They waited for him. “Yo soy tuyo y tú eres mío.”

I am yours and you are mine.

Stavros’ eyes, they blazed. “You leave me speechless every time I see you like this.” His gaze darkened suddenly. “I need your gun.”

Daniel lifted an eyebrow.

“Time to put Hector out of his misery.” He grinned. “I don’t think he enjoyed our show.”

“Where’s your gun?”

Stavros scowled. “Toro took it.”

Daniel pulled his own piece from his waistband and held it up. He didn’t look away from that man, his lover, when Stavros pulled the trigger.

“You want to get up?” Mouth curved, Stavros said, “I’m sure your nephew will be here in a second to make sure I didn’t shoot you.”

“No.”

Of course, Toro chose that moment to come racing in. “Tío!” He skidded to a halt at the bottom of the stairs. “Fuck, Tío. Really?”

Stavros chuckled.

“Put your gun away, Toro. We’ve got a body to deal with.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

They moved in silence. Terse and disapproving on Toro's part. Thick and anticipatory between Daniel and Stavros as they helped Toro load Hector's body into the trunk of his car.

A cleanup crew was on the way, courtesy of Stavros who'd made a hushed ten second phone call before instructing Daniel that his men were on the way. This wasn't Stavros' fight, or his mess to clean up. But Daniel accepted it, because the sooner they got this done, the sooner he got to be alone with Stavros.

He found he needed that. After two weeks of separation, he needed that.

"Tío." Hands in his pockets, Toro hesitated next to the trunk, gaze darting from Daniel to where Stavros stood off to the side.

Waiting.

"What is it?"

"Do you trust him?" Toro asked with a jerk of his chin in Stavros' direction.

Any kind of questioning would normally be off limits from anyone working for him, but Daniel understood where his nephew was coming from. "You think he wants to hurt me?"

Toro shrugged. "I used to think he'd done the worst anyone could possibly do to you," he said in a low tone. "But I see the way you look at him."

"And?"

"He can do much worse." Toro nodded. "He can hurt you even more…" He smiled, but it could just as easily have been a grimace. "And I think

you'd let him."

He wasn't wrong. Daniel pulled Toro close, hugging him, patting him quickly on the back then letting him go to cup his jaw. "You remind me so much of your papá," Daniel told him. "Gracias."

Toro shook his head in obvious confusion, so Daniel explained.

"You keep me honest, like your papá used to." And still did, to some extent. "I trust Stavros," he said firmly. "I know who he is. And he knows who I am."

"Lo amas, tío. Tú lo amas." *You love him.* Toro spoke gently, gaze almost apologetic. Almost as if Toro expected Daniel to react violently.

"Go." He patted Toro's cheek. "Check in when it is done." A trip to the crematorium and they'd be rid of Hector's body permanently.

Toro's gaze flicked over Daniel's shoulder before returning to meet his gaze. "Be careful," he murmured when Daniel knew his nephew had so much more to say.

"Of course."

He remained standing there as Toro got into the car and drove down the long driveway leading from the back of the fenced-off property to the street. When Toro's taillights disappeared from his view, he blew out a breath but didn't move.

Then Stavros was at his side. His presence a heavy, yet welcomed weigh.

"He doesn't trust me."

That calm statement didn't require a response, but Daniel gave him one anyway. "No, he does not."

"Smart."

Side by side, they stood in the impending twilight. Silence so charged, a heavy breeze could spark an inferno. Daniel had so many things he wanted to say, but all of it was somehow not enough so he pulled his hands from his pocket and he reached out.

Blindly.

Grasping Stavros' elbow nearest him then dragging his fingers down so clasp Stavros' hand. To thread their fingers.

To cling.

"Come with me." His gaze remained on the driveway, but his focus was on Stavros. Would always be on Stavros.

"Naí."

Daniel jerked his head, turning to the man next to him. Searching his gaze.

Stavros must've heard the question Daniel didn't ask because he squeezed Daniel's hand and stepped forward. One single, solitary step that seemed so monumental.

Like crossing a bridge of some sort.

"It doesn't matter where or when," Stavros whispered. "Wherever you wish to take me, I want to go." He licked his lips, eyes glittering as they caressed Daniel's face. "Naí. The answer is yes, I'm coming with you."

Daniel would've taken him in his arms then. He would have kissed him, maybe even gone further than just a kiss, but a black paneled van turned down the driveway at that moment.

He tensed.

"My people."

Stavros released him, and Daniel immediately fisted his hand at the loss. He melted into the shadows, allowing Stavros to handle his men. He watched his lover issue orders, calm and emotionless.

They called him heartless.

Daniel had listened to all the chatter about Stavros Konstantinou over the years.

They said he was cold, that you'd get frost-bite just by uttering his name.

All true, but he was also more than that. He burned Daniel in the best way. And in his element, he was captivating. He demanded Daniel's attention and never once loosened that grip.

He was as breath-taking in this place—blood soiling his shirt sleeves and sticking to the bottom of his shoes—as he was in the throes of his orgasm.

Daniel loved all the different sides of him. So he waited, until the room was spotless, with only the sharp stink of bleach permeating the air. He hugged the comfortable shadows until the cleaning crew drove away, stepping forward into the light only when Stavros stood in front of him.

"Ready?"

Fact was, Daniel hadn't known how ready he was until Stavros asked that one-worded question. He stared at Stavros, read the questions in his gaze, and answered them by falling into his embrace. They came together

forcefully, Stavros staggering forward and Daniel stumbling backward until his back hit the closest wall.

Daniel clutched him, bunching Stavros' shirt in his fists, face buried in the other man's neck. He smelled like the chemicals they'd used to clean up, but also faintly of the cologne Daniel missed so much mixed potently with hot skin. He would have missed out on this. He'd walked away from it when all his mind and body wanted to do was go back.

Go back. Relive the firsts.

Make more firsts.

Tremors—so faint, he almost missed them—vibrated along Stavros' spine. Under Daniel's touch. He'd almost martyred them.

Sacrifice.

Sometimes sacrifice meant sticking it out. Sometimes it meant letting yourself take what would make you happy even if it would make someone else sad. He'd had to say goodbye once.

There would be no second time.

He lifted his head, and when Stavros did the same, Daniel told him, "Come with me."

Stavros nodded.

He held out his hand.

Stavros took it.

Daniel didn't let him go, not even on the thirty-two minute drive from Atlanta to the townhouse in Unincorporated Norcross. He could blend in here, if he chose to, but staying there was only temporary. He came and went in the middle of the night usually, and the building was a good distance away from any neighbors who might take note of his weird comings and goings.

Like tonight, as he opened the front door with his left hand because the right was gripping a quiet Stavros. Inside, he quickly turned on the lights and locked the door behind them, before tossing aside the keys.

Stavros glanced around, lips quirked. "You need furniture."

No, he didn't. "I have all I need."

He ascended the stairs, still holding on to Stavros, stopping only when they entered the room he'd claimed as the master bedroom. Releasing Stavros' hand was not a quick thing. More a gradual process, forcing each finger to ease up, to let go.

Stavros curled his fingers into his palm once he was free, and Daniel looked away before he grabbed ahold of him again.

Gaze on the unmade queen-sized bed, the only piece of furniture in the room, Stavros asked, “You live here?”

“I sleep here sometimes.” He jerked a finger over his shoulder to indicate the room next door. “Kept a man chained up there for a few days, too.”

Stavros smiled as he strode to the bed and sat at the edge. “So why no furniture?”

“This isn’t a home,” Daniel said. “This isn’t my home. It serves a purpose, but it’s not comfort nor is it security.”

Stavros nodded as if he understood, and Daniel thought that maybe his lover just might. He faced the window, staring out into the darkness through the blinds. When he’d made the decision to make Petra his, to give himself to her, he’d been nervous.

Palm sweaty as he gathered the words to convey what he felt, preparing for the what-if of a no. She’d deserved more, he’d known even then. A man not drenched in blood and surrounded by death. But the selfish part of him, the part he’d inherited from his papá also knew he would never give her up.

Unless she asked.

She’d never asked, no matter the countless times he’d given her reason to do more than ask. Demand.

Tonight, he was as far removed from nervous as one could possibly get.

Loving Stavros was just as powerful as loving Petra.

Call it blasphemy. Call it betrayal.

Daniel called it honesty.

“I’m sorry.”

He stiffened at Stavros’ hoarse apology then faced him with a frown. “What?”

The other man remained seated on the bed, gaze intense on Daniel’s face. “I never apologized for what I took from you.” Grief streaked across Stavros’ features and he swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

Daniel parted his lips to say…something. Anything. Except he had nothing, could find no words. A fine ache blossomed in the vicinity of his heart, strummed to life by Stavros’ low words.

“I didn’t know then how much she meant to you.” His eyes glittered as he stared at Daniel, hands fisted atop his thighs. “I didn’t know how

precious it was.” His throat worked. “I’m sorry.”

Daniel went to him. Moving softly. Felt as though he moved in the space of a blink. Once second he was at the window, and the next he stood between Stavros’ knees, gazing down at him.

He sifted trembling fingers through Stavros’ thick hair, eyelids lowering at the feel of him. “I forgave you,” he managed the rasp past the boulder in his throat. Fisting Stavros’ hair, Daniel jerked his lover’s head up and back. So their eyes could meet, connect, and he’d see… “I forgave you the first time I kissed you.”

Stavros’ chin quivered.

“You had my forgiveness—” Daniel gripped him tighter, speaking more forcefully. “With our first caress.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

He hadn't meant to speak those words. Hadn't intended to beg forgiveness. A man like him didn't do forgiveness. But the man he was, was kiss-close to something too precious to lose.

He knew what it felt like now. That thing you'd kill to keep. Five minutes. He'd had this all of five minutes and he'd beheaded a man to protect it.

He hadn't lived and breathed it for the better part of two decades. Hadn't built a family and a home. What he felt now, he'd stolen it away from Daniel. What he felt for Daniel now demanded he pull his weight.

Own up to what he'd done.

He slid his hands up, circling Daniel's waist. Dragging him close. "I took her," he whispered. "Stole away your future."

There was an ache in Daniel's eyes. It made him wonder if his lover was even with him, if he was seeing Stavros as he was now. Or as he'd been then. Because how could he forgive it? How could Stavros forgive anyone who even thought to remove Daniel from his life?

"I forgive you." Daniel closed his eyes, and the sensation of being closed off made Stavros dig his fingers into Daniel's back.

"Why?" His voice broke, and that had Daniel's eyes flying open. "Why do I get forgiveness?"

His touch gentled in Stavros' hair. His eyes, where they rested on Stavros' face, they were soft too. Softer than any touch he'd given Stavros before this moment.

"Because I needed you, and to have you I had to forgive you."

Something inside Stavros broke apart and he jumped to his feet, causing Daniel to stagger backward, putting space between them. He didn't want space, didn't need it. But Stavros took it anyway, stalking across the room to the window, giving Daniel his back.

He wasn't as brave as he once was. It all felt so delicate, precarious, like standing on rapidly thinning ice. He'd fall.

No doubt about that.

Would he survive the plunge?

"I don't deserve it." The sheet of ice under his feet cracked, but he took another step anyway. He turned his head to the side, but still didn't look at Daniel.

"Diablo."

Stavros fisted his hands. "I've never been tethered," he said in a hoarse voice. "I'm forty-two years old, and I've never had someone feel for me what I feel for them. I've never been someone's anchor, never had someone be that for me." He spun then, found Daniel a touch away and nearly reached for him.

Nearly.

"I have never been given a chance, because no one chose me." He trembled, that ice becoming increasingly unsteady under his weight. "I'm not the person you go to for forever. I wouldn't go to me for forever. But you—" He touched Daniel then.

On his throat. That scar. It wasn't that he needed reminders. But that scar ensured he'd never forget how much of a monster he was.

"Someone chose you. Someone kept you tethered. Someone promised you forever." His voice devolved into the barest of breaths. Grief. Regret. Disgust at himself. They all sat on his shoulders, bowing them as he whispered, "I made her into a liar."

Daniel shook his head, eyes narrowed, but Stavros kept stepping out on that icy ledge.

"I didn't know what it meant," he confessed. Inside his chest, his heartbeat thundered, echoing. Surely Daniel heard it?

Boom. Boom.

"Not until Felipe threatened you. Not until he threatened to take what kept me tethered." One last crack of the ice and he went crashing in, feet first. Neck deep in truths that baptized him in breath-stealing, lung-numbing fear. "I know what I took from you now." He kept his chin steady, dropping

his hand from Daniel's throat. "If what I feel for you is even the barest bit of what you felt for her, what you had with her, there can be no forgiveness."

Daniel's eyes glittered and Stavros couldn't tell if they were tears or not. He watched Stavros intently. His thoughts, they were hidden, leaving Stavros to wonder, flounder, as he fought to keep his head above the icy waters.

"Are you the one who lost that night?" Daniel asked quietly.

Low. Stavros sunk low. Low. Low. "No," he rasped. He'd lost nothing. So he shouldn't be this hollow inside.

He smiled. Daniel Nieto smiled at him. Not good-looking or gorgeous. But compelling. Captivating. Blinding.

"You are forgiven." Stavros opened his mouth, but Daniel yanked him closer. Hand fisted in the front of his shirt, squeezed between their bodies. Chest to chest. "You have been forgiven." Warm breath chasing away the cold.

Thawing limbs turned stiff with chilling fear.

"You've said a lot, diablo. Now it's my turn."

Lips brushed his and Stavros closed his eyes.

"Ábrelos." *Open.*

Stavros opened his eyes just as Daniel lifted his head.

"This tin man has a heart, diablo. And it is yours." He caught Stavros' hand and brought it up to his chest. Over his heart. "It beats for you."

Stavros opened his mouth, breathing that way because everything felt so big. Everything felt so huge. Under his palm, Daniel's heart beat steady. Strong.

For him.

A gift he didn't deserve, but he was nothing if not selfish, so he grabbed on. Using those vibrations under his touch as lifeline, a way out of that freezing hell he'd fallen into.

Shaking. How could he not? He'd never been speechless before. Never handed himself over into someone else's safekeeping before. Daniel trusted Stavros with his heart after everything. He could do nothing other than reciprocate.

It took nothing at all. No effort to say, "You. You are my heart." Easiest words he'd ever spoken. It was true what they said—whoever *they* were.

The truth made everything better.

When Daniel grinned, Stavros' pulse tripped all over itself. He stared, wonderstruck. He'd been in love.

But it had only ever been one-sided, all on his side. He'd hidden that weakness, didn't want anyone to witness his humiliation of wanting but not being wanted. But in the depths of Daniel's darker than dark eyes, Stavros saw the flames that flickered and grew stronger.

Burning for him.

How?

All those questions crammed into his brain didn't quite make it to his lips. Daniel got there first. Firm lips gentled over his, but his tongue pushed inside.

Licking.

Taking the remnants of Stavros' breath, heating him to boiling in no time at all. Stavros clung to him, shuffling closer on legs that seemed iffy on holding him upright. Lucky for him, Daniel gripped him tight.

Lucky for him.

All the trust he'd never given to anyone, he gifted to the man who'd once been his mortal enemy. Heads twisting this way and that as they ate at each other. Stavros moaned, hips jerking. Body aching in that uniquely intoxicating way he attributed to Daniel.

He brought his hand down between their bodies, yanking on Daniel's shirt, pushing it off his shoulder before flattening his hand over his torso. Daniel grunted into his mouth then bit down on Stavros' bottom lip.

Sharp.

Painful.

He held on while putting a hand on top of the one Stavros touched him with. Circling Stavros' wrist and dragging his touch down.

Down. Past a hard, flat stomach that contracted for him.

Down. To his crotch, over the bulge in his black pants that throbbed under Stavros' palm.

Stavros squeezed him, and Daniel made a whimpery-grunt sound that settled in Stavros' nuts.

Fuck.

He fumbled with Daniel's belt, yanking on him. Fingers uncooperative as he drew the zipper down and reached inside.

"Diablo." Daniel moaned into his mouth, low and long, hips pushing his shaft into Stavros' palm.

Stavros stroked him, his already wet shaft getting soaked with each stroke up and down. Daniel fucked his fist, hips slamming forward.

Grunts.

His.

Theirs.

The smell of them…

"Let me love you," Stavros begged. "Don't stop me."

Daniel lifted his head to squint down at him with low-riding eyelids. "Can I stop you, diablo?" He eased himself in and out of Stavros' fist slowly, cock so hard. Throbbing.

"Yes," Stavros whispered. "Yes." Daniel could stop him. With a word. A look. A sound.

The only one who could. He had that power.

His lover smiled, and Stavros knew then that no matter how many times Daniel smiled, he'd always see it as a first. It would always hit him square in the chest. The gesture would always put his knees to the floor.

"I want inside you." Desperation had his voice and balls jacked up. "I want your legs around me, my dick in your ass, and you on your back speaking Spanish."

Daniel's lashes were lowered, but Stavros felt his reaction to those words. The swelling of his erection, the whoosh of his breath across Stavros' cheek.

"Así que toma lo que es tuyo, diablo." *So take what's yours.*

He took that offering, stripping Daniel in record time before pushing him backward on the bed and climbing him. Hot skin wrapped around him as he devoured Daniel's mouth.

He'd never made love to someone he loved, who loved him.

So even as he licked his way up and into Daniel's mouth, he tried to make himself slow down. Tried telling himself to savor. The fingers scraping his spine, he arched into them. They made him moan and grind against Daniel's thigh.

Lips that broke away from his to glide down the length of his throat, he leaned into the touch. Breath shaking, grabbing on tight to the sheets on either side of them.

Daniel bucked under him, cock as hard as Stavros'. Begging for it with every lift of his hips off the bed.

Jesus.

Stavros held himself still long enough to look down at his lover. His skin glistened already with a fine sheen of sweat. Face flush, lips parted as he panted. Stavros kissed him again. Fuck, but he was addicting. There was something about feeling Daniel's lips under his. Something about their bodies writhing. Something about the way they gave each other pleasure.

He loved it.

Loved the man gripping his ass with a large palm.

Stavros stroked his chest then bent, licking the path his fingers took. Tasting salty skin, biting nipples.

"Diablo." Rusted and worn, that voice was a fucking weapon.

Stavros shuddered, licking his way down Daniel's torso. Fingers in his hair pulled tight, forced him lower. He went with his mouth open and his eyes closed. Tasting cock, sucking it down as Daniel thrust, and Stavros fucked the bed.

"Diablo, por favor." He gave Stavros those words, coated in thick, drugging Spanish. Dripping like fucking honey down his spine. "No pares."

Don't stop.

Stavros would have chuckled at that, but his mouth was full. He hollowed his cheeks, dipped his head, grunting when Daniel throbbed on his tongue. Eyes rolling back at the taste of him.

He brought his slick fingers slower, circled Daniel's hole.

Trembling thighs lifted to the sky.

He dipped in.

"Dios, diablo." Yeah, but he pushed back on the digit, rolled his hips.

Fingers and tongue in his ass, Stavros ate him. Loud and wet, but not loud enough to drown out Daniel's cries. Words he didn't even understand. Shit he was pretty sure made no sense.

But he ate that ass until his jaw threatened to lock up on him. Finger-fucked him until his knuckles ached. Then he pulled away quickly, surfacing only to wipe his face with the back of his hand and get the lube.

Daniel looked fucked out already, and Stavros hadn't even made him come yet. Stavros wanted to wait until he was inside him.

"Legs around me," he gritted. Fuck, he wanted to go slow, but now wasn't the time. His balls wouldn't let him. Every slide of Daniel's hot skin against his ripped control away. He wanted inside. Wanted to rut.

Wanted to spill.

Legs wrapped around his hip.

He tossed the lube away and brought himself to Daniel’s hole.

Daniel flinched. Stavros smoothed a hand over his knee.

He forced words past his locked throat. “Can’t go slow for you, agápi mou.” *My love*. “Want you. Want your body.”

“Cógeme, diablo.”

Take me.

Stavros surged forward, dick sliding up Daniel’s crack.

Fuck.

His hands shook. Daniel’s body vibrated.

Tip to his hole, Stavros held his breath. Pushed in. And Daniel pushed back.

His crown popped in.

Stavros immediately lost the ability to breathe.

Daniel uttered a soul-deep growl.

“God. Damn.” He went in, eyes closed. The heat. “Nothing better.” And he hadn’t even bottomed out yet. Eyes flying open, he pinned Daniel in place with a stare. “Nothing fucking better.”

Daniel’s expression was all hunger and pain. And Stavros got off on both. He buried himself with one deep thrust, noting the flare of Daniel’s nostrils and the tightening of his legs. His chest heaved, and for a second there shock flashed across Daniel’s face.

Stavros circled his hips, lowering himself with one hand next to Daniel’s head, he whispered, “Hang the fuck on.” He reared back and slammed in.

Daniel cried out.

His hole clenched.

Stavros hissed. “Jesus. Fuck.” Daniel’s body fisted around him, choking him. Hot and tight, and every time he moved, Stavros had to fight his orgasm. He thrust in and out, shoving his tongue inside.

Fucking Daniel’s mouth.

Taking his ass.

His lover matched him stroke for stroke, hand on his ass, fingers digging in. He better leave his marks.

They devolved to just grunts and growls, even those muted because they stayed in each other’s mouths. Daniel as greedy as him. Hands and mouths everywhere.

And Stavros, pounding in and out of the best ass he'd ever had the privilege to slide into. He told Daniel that too. Or at least he tried, because Daniel didn't release his mouth to allow to him to talk.

Talking was overrated.

What wasn't was Daniel shoving a hand between them to stroke himself off. Body arching, he came with a garbled sound that Stavros ate, sticky cum immediately gluing them together. His ass contracted around Stavros, restricting his movements.

Strangling.

"Unngh." His toes curled into the mattress as the spasms hit, locking his limbs while the orgasm ripped through him.

Under him, Daniel shuddered, grabbing on to Stavros' shoulders with a grunt.

"Me inside you." He wasn't sure if his tongue was working, but Stavros tried. "That's me inside you." He collapsed onto Daniel's heaving chest. Arms went around him immediately and he hummed in blissful satisfaction. "Give me five minutes and we're doing that again."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"¡Puta madre!"

Stavros lifted his head from Daniel's throat to peer up into his lover's face. "Did you just swear?"

Eyes still hazy from their lovemaking blinked at him. "It was not my intention, no."

Stavros barked a laugh, and Daniel's muscles clenched around him, making them both moan. He should pull out. They should clean up. But this position, Daniel straddling him, Stavros still lodged deep inside him? This position demanded he stay here, palms flat on Daniel's back. He didn't want to move. Sweat slicked their skin, and hot cum squeezed past Daniel's hole and dripped down Stavros' length, bathing his balls.

He liked this, and for some reason it looked as though he might get to keep this. He might not deserve it, not after all the things he'd done. Not just to Daniel. But falling in love was in itself a selfish act. So he hugged his lover a little bit tighter, nuzzling his neck as they sat in the middle of the bed.

Bodies connected.

Daniel shifted slightly and brought both hands up to grip Stavros' hair. "There's somewhere I want to take you," he murmured against Stavros' forehead. "Tomorrow."

"Yes."

Daniel's chuckle vibrated between them. "Will that be your response to all my requests?"

“No, so enjoy it now.” Stavros tilted his head to meet his eyes. “Where do you want to take me?”

A heavy sadness clouded Daniel’s eyes for a minute before disappearing. “It is—” He pursed his lips. “Tomorrow. I will tell you tomorrow.”

Stavros could push, but what would be the point? Instead he nodded. “All right.”

They settled into a calm silence again, until Daniel spoke softly. “We were not the perfect couple.”

“Hmm?”

“Petra and I.” Daniel’s response was so soft, Stavros mostly felt it against his skin. “We were not perfect, but we were perfect for each other.”

Stavros swallowed. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to shake the guilt and shame that touched his soul at the mention or thought of Petra. But he couldn’t hide from it. There was no escaping her. It could be a hindrance if he let it.

“Do you want to talk about her?”

Daniel gazed at him in silence for a few heartbeats then started to lift off him.

Stavros gasped, grabbing his ass to keep him there for a while longer. “Fuck.” Breath shuddered through him. “Jesus.” He dug his fingers into Daniel’s ass cheeks. “Christ.”

“I know.” Daniel kissed his chin. “Sorry.” He took his body away, as Stavros huffed at the acute loss. But Daniel didn’t leave the bed. He simply moved closer to the headboard, tugging Stavros until they sat side by side with their backs against the pillows.

Daniel took Stavros’ hand closest to him and linked their fingers before bringing their joint hand to his mouth, brushing his lips across their knuckles.

Stavros literally just finished fucking this man bareback, and that simple gesture felt way more intimate.

Then Daniel spoke.

“She was more than just a wife. Every step of the way, she stood with me.” His voice was hoarse, but steady. “She knew every detail of what I did.” He glanced at Stavros. “Because I needed her to trust me, and if or when push came to shove, she had to know why I’d ask her to do something. In every way she was my equal.”

It wasn’t as if Stavros didn’t know those types of relationships existed. He’d just never seen one up close. Had never been privy to that kind of sacrifice and devotion.

“She didn’t make me better,” Daniel said softly. “She didn’t want to. She liked me as I was, she always said. And I loved her more for putting up with my life.”

“But she was there from the beginning.”

Daniel nodded. “She was. She gave advice, even when I didn’t think I needed it. She tended my wounds. The visible ones, and especially those I thought I’d hidden from her.” He turned toward Stavros. “Diablo, I don’t want you to think she was a saint. She was human. Sometimes she frustrated me. She was so stubborn.” He snorted. “And she liked to argue. *Dios*,” he breathed out the word. “That woman could argue.”

Stavros smiled. “You never won those arguments, did you?”

“Never, but it was worth it when time came for the making up.” Daniel’s mouth curved. “She was a wildfire I never thought about containing.”

Stavros tightened his fingers around Daniel’s. It was awkward, listening to this. So weird. But he liked to all the same. Liked that Daniel thought nothing of sharing Petra with him.

“That night—” Daniel’s gaze turned inward. “We’d been trying and trying, but we found out that day she couldn’t have children.” His dark eyes filled with remorse as he returned his focus to Stavros. “I was relieved, diablo.” His voice dropped about a million octaves then. “My wife wanted my baby. And I was relieved that she couldn’t have one.”

Shit. “Daniel—”

“It was a betrayal.” Daniel rolled his head back against the headboard and stared up at the ceiling. “After everything she’d given me, after all she’d sacrificed and put up with for me, I was happy she couldn’t bear my child. She saw it for what it was, a betrayal.” He touched his free hand to his left cheek. “She slapped me.”

Stavros swallowed. “Why were you relieved?”

Daniel tensed then blew out a loud breath. “The easy answer would be that I didn’t want to bring an innocent child into the life we led.”

“And the not-so-easy answer?”

“I would not be a good father. I would not be selfless and gentle. All I knew was what my father taught me, and I’d emulated his blood thirst in

business. It was only a matter of time before I was cold-hearted and violent in my own home, too."

Stavros shook his head firmly, a frown on his face. "You know that's not true. Petra would never allow that. And most importantly—" He grabbed Daniel's chin, jerking his head around so their gazes could meet. "Most importantly, agápi mou, you would never hurt your wife or your child."

"I'd like to think that—"

"Fuck that."

Daniel smiled.

"No, seriously. Fuck. That." Stavros leaned forward until their noses bumped. "You're the best man I know, and I'm not saying that because you let me tongue-fuck your ass."

"I should hope not."

They stared at each other for a heartbeat then burst out laughing. Stavros touched his lover's face, tracing the curve of his smile. "My favorite thing is when you smile," he whispered. "My second favorite is knowing I made you smile."

Daniel circled his wrist. "There hasn't been much to smile about, not for a long time."

Because of Stavros. The white-hot guilt flared bright in his chest, and he glanced away. Fingers on his chin forced him to meet Daniel's tender gaze.

"That was not a recrimination against you, diablo." He brushed his thumb over Stavros' bottom lip. "I have forgiven you. You must forgive yourself." He cocked his head. "Have you forgiven me?"

"For what?" Stavros gaped at him.

"I kidnapped you. I tortured you."

Stavros waved that away. "That shit was fucking foreplay to me. You know that."

"Do I know that?" Daniel lifted an eyebrow.

"You know that."

"Penance."

"Yes." He wouldn't lie. "But more than that. I wanted to feel what you made me feel. The pain, the lust, the fear of falling." Stavros licked his lip, tongue dragging over Daniel's thumb in the process. "I can't stand the thought of you not being close enough to touch."

"We connected through blood and violence," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"We're bloody, violent men."

A slow smile broke across Daniel's face. Goddamn. He would never *not* stun Stavros with that gesture. "We deserve each other."

"Got that shit right in one."

Daniel squinted at him. "Must you always swear?"

The happiness in Stavros' chest bubbled over, spilling from his lips in the form of low chuckle. "Fucking yes."

Daniel kissed him. Hard and fast, but shit, with so much possession. "Lie with me, diablo."

"Anytime. All the time."

"Beautiful house."

Daniel grunted at Stavros' soft words as he put the key into the lock. They stood on the half wrap-around porch of the Greek revival hidden about a mile and a half away from any main roads. Ten-foot walls around the perimeter hid the two-story white house with dark blue shutters from the view of anyone traveling down the barely worn dirt track outside.

No one came here except him.

"Why are we here?"

To his credit, Stavros had waited a long time before asking the question. Though he'd thrown Daniel some curious glances on the plane, he hadn't asked. Daniel appreciated his restraint, especially since he had yet to fully find the words to explain.

Stavros touched his shoulder. "Daniel?"

Daniel took in his lover, always impeccably dressed, love bites and Daniel's fingerprints decorating his neck and throat.

It had been a spur of the moment thing last night to ask Stavros to join him. Testament to how much Daniel had changed. He wasn't known for spur of the moment anything. He didn't regret the invite. This was something Stavros needed to know if they were to continue with this… whatever this was.

He wished to continue, so he nodded once. "There is someone I want you to meet. She is inside."

"Okay." Stavros dragged the word out. "Who is she?"

"Someone I love," Daniel told him softly. Someone he'd disappointed time and again. She deserved better. Stavros didn't speak again, but the

questions remained in his eyes, so Daniel told him, “I’ll explain when we get inside.” Immediately he regretted the flash of caution in Stavros’ eyes, but before he could reassure his lover, the door was yanked open from the inside.

The tip of a gun touched his forehead. He didn’t move, but next to him, Stavros swore viciously, hand going to his waistband.

“No.” Daniel grabbed Stavros’ hand, staying his movements before meeting the eyes of the slight woman holding the gun. “Charlie.”

She blinked and her hard brown eyes widened. “Sir!” She dropped the weapon to her side, eyes darting from Daniel to Stavros and back. From her blank expression, she knew who Stavros was. “Sir, forgive me. I—”

“What is this?” Stavros snapped.

Daniel didn’t look at him, simply holding up a hand as he addressed Charlie. “It is fine. I should have called ahead.” He usually gave Charlie and her companion advance notice, but he’d let that slip his mind. “I am sorry.”

At five-four, Charlie’s head barely made it to the center of his chest as she pursed her lips. Something she did when she had more to say.

“What is it, Charlie?”

“Is-Is something wrong, sir?” The tremor in her words gave away her worry.

“No.” He shook his head quickly. He jerked his thumb toward Stavros, who stood stiffly next to him, being quietly loud. “He is with me.”

Charlie swallowed.

“He can be trusted.” Charlie should know better than to doubt his words, but he’d been the one to show up without advance notice, a man with a reputation like Stavros’ in tow.

“Of course, sir.” She stood off to the side, allowing him entrance.

Daniel stepped inside, Stavros at his heel. In the foyer, Daniel gazed up the circular staircase, painted the same white and dark blue as the house’s exterior. “Where is she?”

“Upstairs.” Her gaze rested on Stavros for a hot second before she continued, “Lành is with her.”

Daniel needed something to do with his hands, so he shoved them into the pockets of his coat then fisted them. “How is she?”

“Today is a calm day.” Charlie’s tone switched from hesitant and cautious to a softness borne from caring. Daniel’s doubts about her and her

partner, Lành, caring for one of the most important people in his life had dissipated a long time ago.

He turned to Stavros. His lover's expression was smooth, flawless, but Daniel read the confused curiosity in the depths of Stavros' eyes. "Come." He held out his hand. "There is someone I would like you to meet."

He appreciated Stavros' immediate and tight grip. He appreciated how easy Stavros made it seem, making a decision and sticking to it. They climbed the stairs, Daniel leading, Stavros behind him, Charlie at the bottom of the stairs watching with wide eyes.

On the second floor landing he walked the few steps to the bedroom, and stopped at the closed door.

Hesitated would be the correct word. It wasn't about trusting Stavros with this, because he trusted his lover implicitly. This was about finally sharing the weight of something he'd dragged around on his shoulders for a long time.

Fingers touched his chin, gripped his jaw. "Look at me," Stavros muttered fiercely. "Look at me."

Daniel looked at him. Stared into his eyes. There was a power somewhere inside his lover. A magnetic something that pulled him close. That calmed him. Centered him. "Diablo."

"Doesn't matter." Stavros turned them, pushing Daniel into the wall next to the closed door. Fingers tight on Daniel's jaw, lips brushing his when Stavros repeated, "It does not matter what or who is behind that door. I'm with you one hundred percent."

Fact was, Daniel didn't know who waited for him behind that door. Her face would remain the same, but her mind…

"Open the door for me," Stavros whispered against his lips. "Let me walk through it with you."

Daniel wrapped his arms around Stavros' waist and held him. Just… held him. Breathing deeply. Taking a moment, that moment, to lean on someone. He used to have Petra. Now he had Stavros.

"Okay." He nodded and pulled away, turning to the door. One hand on the knob, the other gripping tight to Stavros, he opened the door and stepped into the bedroom.

Lành sprang from the bed, weapon raised. He'd been confused by their outward appearance when he first met Lành, and they'd been quick to instruct Daniel on the proper pronouns to use. Petite face framed by a neatly

trimmed beard, muscular legs exposed under a pink, knee length skirt, bra straps visible under the sleeve of their tank top, Vietnam-born Lành was like no one Daniel had ever met.

“Mr. Nieto.” Stopping abruptly, their brow furrowed. “Sir, what—”

“All is well.” He glanced over to the woman on the bed. “How is she?”

“Resting.” Lành’s focus had switched to Stavros and their brow furrowed. “She’s calm today, sir.”

“Good.” He nodded to Lành. “This is Stavros Konstantinou. You can trust him.”

“Of course, sir.” They sounded like Charlie, cautious and skeptical.

Daniel bit back a smile. “Diablo.” He tugged Stavros forward. “This is my mother.” He gestured to the woman curled onto her left side on the bed. “Anna-Maria Nieto.” He watched Stavros take in the woman on the bed before he turned back to Daniel.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Alzheimer’s.” Daniel faced the bed, releasing Stavros’ hand to stride closer and stare down at her face. She looked peaceful with her eyes closed, hair brushed away from her face and secured at her nape. “Her mind—” He swallowed. “It’s going.”

Sometimes her mind left. Sometimes it returned, and sometimes he wished it didn’t.

“She’s been fed,” Lành said from behind him. “Medication taken.” They hesitated. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Daniel nodded without looking away from his mother. “Lành. Gracias.”

“Of course, sir.” Soft footsteps then the door closed, leaving them alone.

Stavros came to him, his presence at Daniel’s side somehow easing him.

“She’s beautiful.” Stavros’ shoulder brushed Daniel’s. “Delicate.”

Daniel nodded. “But so strong.” He turned to Stavros then. “She’s leaving me, diablo. Bit by bit. Memory by memory.”

“How long?” Stavros asked.

“Years.” Years of them dismissing the small, almost insignificant symptoms. Until they couldn’t anymore. “But she’s declined rapidly the past two years.”

“This is where you’ve been.” Stavros gestured to the bed. “When everyone thought you’d gone underground, you were here, taking care of her.”

“Sí.” Daniel walked around the bed, and climbed on, shoes and all, lying next to his sleeping mother. Hands folded atop his stomach. Stavros watched him intently, eyes soft and sad. “Sit, diablo.” He pointed to one of the armchairs over in the corner. “Stay with me.”

An indulgent smile creased Stavros’ face as he pulled the chair close and sat, right ankle propped on his left knee. “You know I’m going nowhere.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

It was Daniel’s turn to smile, caught in the open challenge of Stavros’ gaze. Until the bed shifted. The smile fell away, his gaze too as Daniel turned his head toward the woman beside him.

Her eyes were open, clouded with sleep and an emptiness he immediately dreaded. He faced her on his side, their heads side by side on the pillow. “Hola, mamá.”

Her brow wrinkled, and she touched him tentatively, a finger across his cheek. Her lips moved as she struggled to speak. “Who— Who?”

He smiled, even though that gesture was far too tight. Too brittle to really be classified as a smile. He also made sure to keep his voice calm and even. “I am Daniel. You are mi mamá.”

Her wide eyes flitted over to him, and in her confused gaze he saw Levi. He saw Antonio. She tried to speak again, but when only jumbled sounds escaped, tears streamed down her face.

“Ah, mamá. It’s okay.” Daniel sat up with her, touching her fragile wrist. “It is okay.”

“Ma-Ma,” she muttered urgently. “Mamá. Mamá.”

“Sí.” He hugged her close then, arms wrapped around her skinny shoulders. “Sí, that is what you are. My mother.” Emotion twisted his voice into a grating rasp. Stavros touched his leg, rubbing slightly.

Her tears, they fell harder, faster, dripping onto his arm. They ripped him open, every drop. He closed his eyes, trapping his own wet sorrow as he started to sing. An old song he’d heard her hum countless times around the house as he grew up. A song about finding the strength to move on after the loss of a loved one.

A song about bravery.

He sang it to her as his mother cried in his arms. Stavros’ grip on his leg tightened and remained on him, keeping Daniel tethered amidst the

maelstrom of helplessness and useless anger that soured his gut.

At the end, he kissed her forehead. “Hush, mamá. You are safe.” Daniel clung to her when she tried to yank away from him. “You are safe. All is well.” Losing someone in stages, there could be no other pain like it. The drowning helplessness, nothing as debilitating as that.

One hand wrapped around her, he motioned to Stavros to get the brush sitting on her dresser. Then Daniel brushed his mother’s hair.

She sighed, closed her eyes, and settled with her head in his lap.

He brushed her hair with Stavros next to him, offering up silent strength.

He brushed her hair with trembling hands, trying to be in the moment. Knowing their time was limited. Her deterioration had accelerated. That knowledge froze his movements, and he stared down at his hands.

At his white knuckles clenching the handle of the brush.

Stavros touched him, nudging Daniel’s hand out of the way. And his lover took over where Daniel couldn’t anymore.

Stavros brushed her hair, his head bent slightly in concentration. Gentle. Respectful. He brushed her hair, and Daniel’s broken heart knitted itself together at that sight.

She fell asleep finally. Stavros stopped, putting the brush aside while Daniel settled her back onto the pillows and pulled the covers up over her.

Then he got off the bed and stared down at her. Stavros next to him, his lover’s thumb rubbing the fist Daniel made.

“Come.” Stavros tugged on him, and Daniel followed him past the wheelchair in the corner, out the room, and out onto the screened-in porch next door to his mother’s suite.

“Daniel.” The sadness in Stavros eyes. In his voice, propelled Daniel into his lover’s embrace.

He buried his face in Stavros’ neck. Holding on tight as he fell apart. He’d been watching his mother disappear before his eyes for the past few years, helpless to do anything to stop it. The medication. The doctors. There was nothing to be done except prolong the inevitable.

“What do you need?” Stavros asked against his neck. “What do you need me to do?”

Need. He’d tried harder than most to not need anything ever since Petra died. Need was a bone-deep thing. Need made the strongest of men weak. Need could get you killed.

“I need you.” He pulled away to look into Stavros’ eyes. “I need you, diablo.”

Stavros’ mouth opened. Then closed. A muscle in his jaw jumped. Then he opened his mouth again. “I meant for your mother.”

“I know.” Daniel nodded. “But the answer remains the same.” He pulled away from Stavros to take a seat in one of the chairs—white wicker with green cushions. Green was his mother’s favorite color. He waited until Stavros sat opposite him before he spoke again. Before he confessed, “I’m not all right.” He would never be all right with being this helpless, with watching his mother fade.

Stavros’ eyes flashed and he dropped to his knees in front of Daniel. “It doesn’t fucking matter. I’ll be here when you’re all right. And especially when you’re not.”

There really shouldn’t be anything to smile about in this situation. Nothing to be happy about. Except there was. The man on his knees with fire and promise in his eyes. He made Daniel smile when there’d been nothing to smile over in so many years. He made Daniel happy even in the midst of bleak despair.

“How do you do that?” Daniel asked softly.

Stavros’ brow wrinkled. “Do what?”

“Make me happy.” Daniel cupped his face, brushing his thumb along Stavros’ jaw. “How do you make the darkness bearable?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad I do.” Eyes closed, Stavros turned his face into Daniel’s palm, pressing his lips there. “You deserve—”

“You. That is what I deserve, diablo.”

Stavros’ lashes lifted. “Then take what you deserve.”

Daniel bent, forehead against Stavros. “I want to share my mother with you, and everything else.” He was watching closely, so he saw the slight widening of Stavros’ eyes.

“You want to share a life.”

“I do.” Daniel licked his lips. “I know commitment and monogamy aren’t things you’re familiar with.” His fingers tightened on Stavros’ face. “I don’t expect—”

“Expect.” Stavros grabbed Daniel’s hand, bringing it to the middle of his chest. Holding him there in the tightest grip. “You brought me here. You let me see you. You damn well better expect things from me,” he said fiercely, gaze hot and heavy as the midday sun. “Expect things from me.”

“Diablo.”

“Expect me to love you like you love me.” He shifted closer, settling between Daniel’s legs. “Expect me to respect you enough to do right by you,” he said hoarsely. “For once, fucking expect me to take care of your heart.”

Between Daniel’s legs, he trembled. “Hush.” Daniel smoothed a hand over Stavros’ head and cupped his nape to tilt his head back. “Stavros.”

“No.” Stavros shook off his hold. “Tell me.” He fisted the front of Daniel’s shirt. “Tell me what you expect from me.”

Daniel kissed him, lips pressed to Stavros’ trembling mouth. He kissed him hard. Quick. Then soft and slow, coaxing Stavros open, sinking inside with a moan. Coming home, he always felt like coming home.

Warm and inviting.

His taste was tailored specifically for Daniel. Wet and wild. Dark and intriguing. Carnal and addictive.

“I expect you to love me like I love you,” he whispered into that kiss. “I expect you to do right by me, because I will do right by you.” Stavros shuddered. His grip on Daniel faltered. “I expect you to take care of my heart, diablo, because I will take care of yours.”

“Yes.” Stavros sighed into his mouth. “Yes.” He lurched forward, taking Daniel’s mouth again. Pushing his way inside, tongue shoving deep.

Daniel grunted, tugging on his hair.

Falling all over again.

Drowning.

Willingly.

Stavros broke away first, staring up at Daniel with wet lips and wide searching eyes. “I’ve always been a selfish man.” He cleared away the hoarseness from his throat. “That will not change, Daniel.”

Daniel smiled at that warning. “I’ve seen your selfish side, diablo. I like it.” In truth, they were both selfish men, which made them ideal for each other.

“I can’t believe you forgive me.”

Daniel shook his head. “That wasn’t a selfless gesture, Stavros. I had nothing, and then I had you. You have become everything, diablo. And to accept that gift, I had to forgive. But I can only give forgiveness. Redemption is yours.” He placed his hand over Stavros’ heart. “Redemption starts here.”

Stavros glanced toward the door leading back to Anna-Maria's bedroom. "This road, this journey with your mother, I want to be there with you. For you."

"I want that, too."

Stavros squinted. "You've been doing it alone? What about—"

"It's been a very long journey. Antonio knew. And Petra. But no one else."

"Levi?"

Daniel scrubbed a hand over his face. He struggled with this for so long. "He doesn't know she's alive."

Stavros stiffened. "Explain."

So Daniel did, telling Stavros about the circumstances surrounding Levi's birth and his life away from the Nieto life.

"Shit." Stavros rocked back on his haunches. "And all this time you haven't told Levi?"

"Believe it or not, I don't know what to say. And is it fair to either of them?" Daniel asked the questions he'd been asking himself for years. "She doesn't have her faculties. She won't know him. How do I do that to him?"

Stavros got up from his knees and retook his seat, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I would want to know."

Daniel watched him as emotions played across his face.

"My mother, you know she died giving birth to me."

Daniel touched Stavros' folded hands. "I know."

"Growing up without her, that was…hard. There was something missing that my father could never fix. At least, he didn't try. If I could have her for one day…" He fisted his hands. "If I could hug her just once, tell her I love her—" His voice broke as he met Daniel's gaze with red-rimmed eyes. "I would want that one day. That one hug. That one moment."

Daniel squeezed his hand. "You think I should tell Levi."

"Yes."

Selfishly, he was relieved that someone made the decisions for him. "Then I will."

Stavros cocked his head. "Yeah?"

"Sí, and you'll come with me to Seattle."

His lover grinned, mischief dancing once again in the depths of his eyes. "You know, Donovan Cintron is kinda the shoot first, ask questions later type, right?"

Daniel returned his grin with one of his own. “You should have thought of that before you kidnapped his husband.”

“You know me.” Stavros opened his hand, palms flat against Daniel’s, linking their fingers. “I live for danger.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

"This is a bad idea." Stavros glanced from the house back to Daniel seated next to him in the back of the SUV. "Don't get me wrong, I'm good with it. Just wanted to make sure you knew, that this—" He waved at the house again. "Is a really fucking bad idea."

"Noted." Daniel's mouth twitched.

Five minutes they'd been sitting outside this house. If Stavros had his way, they'd leave Seattle and go back to New York. Maybe Atlanta. Hell, a nearby hotel would do. They'd been on the move since leaving Daniel's mother two days ago. Daniel tying up loose ends. And Stavros handling his own business via phone calls with his uncle. No time to exhale.

This moment was going to be hard on Daniel, and Stavros refused to let his lover do it alone. So he'd come here to Seattle, to be face to face with Levi and his husband. Of course, Stavros fully expected Donovan Cintron to retaliate for what Stavros did.

He'd do the same, so he couldn't be mad. Shit, he didn't even care.

Not really.

"Did I tell you I have a house on St. Simons Island in Georgia?" He sidled closer to Daniel, until their shoulders were pressed together. "It's on the southeast coast, midway between Savannah and Jacksonville."

Daniel broke off his staring of the house and touched a finger to Stavros' cheek. "Is it?"

"Yeah." Stavros tilted his head back, breathing turned loud and heavy when Daniel's hand traveled down to his throat and squeezed slightly.

“House on the beach, too.” Daniel pressed on his throat and Stavros’ lips parted. “I want to fuck you there.”

“On the beach?” Daniel’s expression was all calm seas and blue skies, but his voice was another matter. Choppy, as the hand at Stavros’ throat moved south, digging into his stomach before dipping lower.

Gripping his erection.

Stavros groaned.

“It is true,” Daniel whispered, breath washing over Stavros’ lips in a teasing wave of heat. “We need a vacation.”

“Fuck.” Stavros bucked into his grip. “Yeah, we do.”

“And I must admit…” He licked Stavros, a wet trail of fire across his jaw. “I’m in love with your sex.”

Jesus. Stavros grabbed him by the hair, mashing their lips together. “Don’t fucking say things like that. Not here.” He bit Daniel’s lip then sucked on it, shaking when Daniel’s grip on his cock got tighter. The sweet pain closed his eyes as he rammed his hips forward.

“Diablo.”

“Shut.” *Lick.* “Your.” *Bite.* “Mouth.” *Kiss.* Stavros tore his mouth away, panting as he clutched at Daniel. “Otherwise I will fuck you in your baby brother’s driveway.”

Daniel shuddered, and Stavros pushed him backward onto the seat, throwing one leg over him.

Straddling him.

Daniel’s cock pressed hard against Stavros, and he moaned, head thrown back, both hands clutching Daniel’s nape as he rocked against him. Daniel cupped his ass, mouth on Stavros’ neck, hips lifting as they dry humped.

Damn, but Stavros couldn’t remember the last time he’d done something like this. It was intoxicating. Hot and exhilarating. Daniel’s grunts danced over Stavros’ skin, his fingers tight and definitely leaving marks. They moved together.

Rubbing.

Grinding.

No other way to describe it other than so damn good.

He caught Daniel’s head, lifting him to catch his lips, sucking them one by one into his mouth as Daniel panted for him. Then Stavros went in.

And he went deep.

Fucking his way into Daniel, their mouths wide, heads slanted this way, then that way. Tongues clashed, tangling.

Daniel moaned and Stavros tasted it, rough and sinister before the sound disintegrated around their kiss. He'd spend the rest of the day here in the backseat of the SUV, dry-humping Daniel with his tongue down his throat, all of his lover's sounds flavoring their kiss. Darkening it. Tinting it something ragged.

Something wild and desperate.

Much like the man bucking up against Stavros' ass, the man whose fingers gripped him so tight. So fucking dangerous. That danger spurred Stavros on and he reached between them, grasping Daniel's crotch.

His lover's breath stuttered.

Stavros grinned as his fingers settled on Daniel's belt.

The car door to his left opened and hands grabbed Stavros by the hair, yanking him off Daniel and out of the vehicle. He fell to the ground on his knees.

"Ain't this some shit."

He lifted his head and stared down the barrel of Donovan Cintron's gun.

Well, fuck.

Daniel rushed out the SUV, and Stavros' heart stuttered.

"Daniel," he barked. "Stop." He didn't look away from Van, but from the corner of his eye he saw Daniel freeze. "This is between Van and me." Slowly, he lifted his hands to interlock them behind his head.

"Diablo." The agony in Daniel's voice, Stavros recognized it. The need to do something, anything to protect the person you loved even as you remained helpless to make any moves.

"Stop." Stavros shook his head slowly. "Let me do this."

Donovan Cintron's hand didn't waver, not even when his husband came running out the front door.

"Van, shit!" Levi skidded to a stop next to his husband. "You're in public view, damn it."

Stavros smiled. Was it wrong that he liked that Levi didn't reprimand Van for pulling a gun on Stavros? Those Nieto boys, bloodthirsty as fuck.

"Van, put your gun away," Daniel spoke softly, carefully. Probably the first time Stavros had ever heard him take that careful tone.

He didn't like it.

“Been a while since I’ve wanted to take a bite out of you,” Van said. “You like to think you’re untouchable, and you might have been. Until you put your hands on what’s mine.”

“When you’re at war, you use all the weapons at your disposal.” Stavros shrugged. “Levi was a weapon.”

Van smashed him across the face with the gun, and Stavros jerked backward. Shit. That hurt.

“Van.”

Stavros managed to peer past the blood dripping down his face. Daniel had a hand on Van’s shoulder. Levi had his hands folded as he watched closely.

“Leave him.” Stavros licked at his cut lip, wincing at the resulting burn. “Leave him,” he told Daniel again. “It’s okay.”

He didn’t even see the fist coming until it smashed into his nose.

“You pussy as fuck,” Van snarled as he got down into a crouch in front of Stavros. “Next time you even think about involving my husband in your jacked-up games, I’m shooting your ass.” He straightened. “And I don’t give a fuck who’s keeping your dick wet.” He walked away, back to the house with his husband at his side.

Daniel grabbed Stavros, helping him to his feet. “Are you all right?”

“I’m okay.” Stavros wiped at his face with his sleeve. “We both know I’ve been through worse.”

“Why did you stop me?” Daniel fisted the front of Stavros’ jacket. His eyes narrowed as he sized up Stavros. “He could have killed you.”

“And I wouldn’t have deserved it?” He placed a hand over Daniel’s. “Let’s not pretend I didn’t fuck up and cross a line by involving Levi and Toro in our fight.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened.

“I stopped you because if he’d done to you what I did to Levi, I’d have reacted the same damn way. Besides, if he wanted to hurt me, I’d be hurt.” He didn’t doubt that. Stavros cracked his neck. “I’m fine, and your brother is waiting for you in there.” He shook his head when Daniel opened his mouth. “I’ll be waiting for you here. Your brother needs you.” He cupped Daniel’s jaw. “You need him, too.”

A small twitch curved Daniel’s mouth. “There’s blood on your throat.” His fingers touched Stavros there, feather light. Still, that bit of rough lingered. Like all of Daniel’s touches. “I am hard for you.”

“You’re always hard for me.” Stavros grinned. “But the sooner you talk to your brother, the sooner my tongue can be in your ass.”

Daniel’s nostrils flared and he yanked Stavros into his arms, mouth going to his throat. Wet heat flared against his Adam’s apple when Daniel licked him.

Licked his blood.

Hell. “You know I’m gonna fucking come if you keep that nasty shit up.”

Daniel released him abruptly and stepped back. “Wait for me in the car.”

“Always.” Stavros gave him a crooked smile.

With a shake of his head, a smile playing on his lips, Daniel turned toward his brother’s house. “Oh, and one more thing…”

Stavros stopped with his hand on the car door and looked back.

“When I return you will finish what you started in that backseat.”

Stavros licked his lips.

“Then you’ll take us to that beach house of yours, and do it all over again.”

God. Damn. “I love you,” he said. Because that was really the only response a moment like that required.

“Lo sé.” Daniel nodded once. “I love you, too.” He continued the short trek to his brother’s front door.

And Stavros waited for him.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Three days after meeting her youngest son, Anna-Maria Nieto contracted pneumonia. With her immune system already compromised, she never recovered. And three weeks after that emotional moment, she died.

In Daniel's arms, with Levi next to him. With Van and Stavros nearby, she left.

The first time Daniel got to see Stavros' beach house was the day they arrived, all four of them plus Toro, to scatter his mother's ashes in the ocean. The loss was one he expected, but that expectation didn't lessen the pain. Nor did it ease the guilt.

He wished he'd told Levi about her earlier.

He wished he could get Antonio out to see her one last time, instead of having to send word to the prison via a third party about her passing.

He wished they'd all recognized the signs of her illness for what it was, instead of chalking it up to her age. To the stress of being the wife of someone like Eduardo Nieto.

Mostly he regretted the time he spent away from her when she needed him most. Time he couldn't get back.

He tightened his fingers around the rail as he stood out on the second-story balcony outside the master bedroom, looking out over the dark beach below. 1:53 in the morning and he couldn't sleep. Their guests had left earlier that day, after spending two days at the beach house, so now it was just Daniel and Stavros.

Stavros, who'd been in New York when Daniel got the news about Anna-Maria's infection. He'd flown back right away and never left. Staying

at Daniel's side, giving him strength when he'd been sure he'd run out. Stavros gave him comfort by just being close.

And Daniel loved him.

Of all the paths he'd seen himself taking after Petra's death, he'd never seen this one. And he was glad for it.

"Hey." Arms slid around his naked shoulders from behind, before Stavros' lips brushed his nape. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No." He tilted his head back and to the side so Stavros could kiss his neck. This was his safest place. Stavros' arms. The irony wasn't lost on Daniel, but he didn't care. Couldn't afford to. Not when the warmth from his lover's body poured out into him.

Not when Stavros' palms slid down Daniel's chest and settled on his hip, exerting enough pressure to make him turn around and face Stavros' sleep-creased face under the moonlight. His thick dark hair was rumpled, eyes still hazy with sleep.

The most alluring man Daniel had ever put eyes on.

He brushed a lock of hair from Stavros' eyes. "I'll come to bed soon."

Stavros shrugged. "Or not. Doesn't matter, I'm here."

He was, and had been the constant in Daniel's life. Before, it had been Petra. Then the anger and thirst for revenge. Now, it was Stavros.

"Hey," Stavros caught his chin, lifting Daniel's head enough for their gazes to hold. "You feel guilty."

Stavros knew him, so Daniel didn't insult him by denying that statement. "Yes."

"Okay." Eyes glittering, Stavros nodded. "Tell me why."

With his back against the railing, Daniel blew out a breath and tipped his head all the way back, staring up at the black sky. "It is true what they say, diablo. El Karma es cabrón." *Karma is a bitch.* "I once told a man I would kill everyone he loved and leave him alive to live with that pain. With that guilt." He met Stavros' eyes. "I'm that man today. Everyone I love is dying and I'm still alive, living with the pain. With the guilt."

"Not everyone you love is dying. Your brothers are here. Your nephews." The corners of Stavros' mouth curved in the most wicked of ways. "Me."

"Diablo," Daniel breathed out the nickname. "I love you." He had to say it. Had to make sure Stavros understood. Daniel loved him.

Loved him.

“I know.” Stavros leaned into his chest, holding him tighter. “Tell me why you’re feeling guilty about your mother.”

At the mention of her, Daniel’s chest tightened and his breath roughened. “We didn’t recognize the signs earlier,” he rasped. “When she forgot what day it was. When she had trouble tying her laces. She’d leave the house then return, forgetting where she was headed. But I didn’t know. We didn’t know.”

“Of course not.” Stavros stroked his face, brow creased in confusion. “How could you know?”

“My father mistreated her.” Those words were ashes on his tongue, the acrid bitterness a permanent thing. “He took advantage of her weakening state, and we never saw it. She never told us.” He inhaled sharply. “He’d always been a violent man, but I had no reason to think he’d harm the mother of his children.” He grabbed onto Stavros, staring into his lover’s eyes as he said, “I had no reason to think he’d harm the woman who’d loved him for more than half her life.”

But Eduardo liked inflicting pain too much to stop at just his enemies. Or his sons, as it turned out.

“What did he do?”

Thinking about it only served to raise his ire. Daniel fisted his hands, holding them down at his sides as Stavros stroked him softly. Just the barest contact with his fingertips gliding up and down along Daniel’s sides and he wanted to yawn and stretch into the comfort.

“Antonio found them.” The words scratched at his throat, soaked in pained anger. “She was cowering in the kitchen, papá towering above her. She’d set the kitchen on fire trying to make breakfast and he’d knocked her to the ground.” He squeezed his eyes shut before reopening them. “She didn’t know where she was. Didn’t recognize ’Tonio. Couldn’t speak the name of her husband or sons.”

“Jesus.” Stavros’ breath washed over Daniel’s throat.

“I wasn’t home, but ’Tonio brought her to Petra. I would’ve dealt with papá,” he told Stavros. “I would have dealt with him. ’Tonio got to him first.”

“Rumor has it you were the one to kill your old man.”

“Sí.” He knew about the rumors, but neither he nor Antonio ever corrected it. “After that day, she lived with Petra and me. No one knew the real reason. We kept her out of sight once she’d been diagnosed. After Petra

died, I had to make a choice about her, about the business. Even from prison, ’Tonio wanted me to go back into the life, but our mother had to come first. And I had to make it so that I could be free to take care of her for however long she needed.”

Stavros released him abruptly and stood next to him, facing the beach while Daniel faced the house. “That’s why you partnered with Syren.”

“He owed me, and he had the resources to make sure I remained untouchable.” He couldn’t keep looking over his shoulder, not if he wanted to help his mother. He couldn’t be behind bars while she needed him.

“You made yourself untouchable from the Feds, but Felipe was something different.”

Felipe was personal. “He blamed me for Petra’s death.”

“Yep,” Stavros whispered. “But you also made him think you wanted back into the business. You forced him to make a move out in the open.”

“And then you cut his head off.” Daniel twisted around to press his lips to Stavros shoulder. “I didn’t expect that from you, diablo. And I don’t think I thanked you.”

“Fuck, I don’t need your gratitude.” Eyes narrowed, Stavros grasped him by the chin. “Why did you take me? Really?” The moonlight gave his eyes an ethereal glow, making them even wider as he stared at Daniel.

He smiled. “Because I wanted you. I needed you,” he confessed. “I thought it was only because of Petra that I saw your eyes in my sleep, diablo.” Leaning forward, he brushed Stavros’ nose with his as he whispered. “I thought that fire in my belly when I thought of you was all hate, diablo. And I thought wanting to keep you close was simply because of what you’d done.”

Stavros blinked.

“But it was more.” Always more. “You gave me so much pain, but you give me pleasure, too. And if losing Petra put me in a prison, you are the jailor. The one with the key. Diablo.” He cupped Stavros’ jaw. “You set me free.”

“Shit.” Stavros looked shell-shocked.

Daniel chuckled. “Sí.”

But Stavros didn’t return his smile. “You can do so much better.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Daniel shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I only want to do you.”

Stavros barked a laugh. “Goddamn. Loving you is—” He shook his head. “Loving you is the shit.”

Daniel took Stavros’ hand and placed it on his torso, over Petra’s name. “Touch me, diablo. And don’t be gentle.”

But Stavros’ attention was locked on his hands splayed on Daniel’s skin. “What do you think she would have said about this? About us?”

For a moment, Daniel had to gather his thoughts. And then he spoke honestly. “I think at first she wouldn’t understand. And she’d probably slap me. But she’d try. She would try to get it, diablo. And she’d want me to live however I wanted as long as I was happy.”

Stavros swallowed.

Daniel leaned forward and kissed him. “She’d want me with someone who could handle who I am. What I am. And she’d say fuck anyone who doesn’t get us.”

Stavros’ eyes went wide. “She swore?”

“Motherfucker was her favorite.” He grinned at the comical expression on Stavros’ face. “Sometimes she’d slip and curse around my mother. Those were fun times.”

Stavros’ throat worked and sadness clouded his eyes. “I can’t believe you’re sharing her with me. So freely.”

Daniel gave in and gathered him in his arms. Stavros clung to him, face buried in his neck. “I shared everything with her. And I will share everything with you. Everything, including her.”

Stavros clasped his nape and tugged Daniel’s head back. “You’ve got me.”

“Do I?” Daniel lifted a brow.

“You’ve got me.” He kissed Daniel, hard. Sharp. “Fuck, you’ve got me.”

Daniel wiped all traces of mirth from his face. “Prove it.”

Stavros’ nostrils flared at that snarled directive and his eyes flashed seconds before he slammed his mouth onto Daniel’s. Hard enough to stagger him, to have him grasping onto something, anything to keep his balance.

But then Stavros’ tongue dove deep, and Daniel didn’t care about staying upright.

He cared only about matching each carnal stroke with his own. About lifting his right leg up to hook around Stavros’ waist, rubbing his erection

against all that hardness. All that heat. Fingers clawed at him, stripping away skin, digging deeper than bone.

Stavros panted into his mouth, laving, lashing at him. Always his kisses brought a desperation, a hunger Daniel felt in his gut. He'd never outrun it, and he didn't want to.

He wanted this moment, shoving a hand under the waistband of Stavros' shorts, cupping an ass cheek.

Squeezing.

Tasting that shredded groan. Feeling the tremors. Ready for the earthquake.

He'd walk away from everything to have this every single day. Stavros' arms tight around him, constricting, but still freeing. His mouth, destroying Daniel with all that wet. Drowning him. Rescuing.

His life in Stavros' hands.

His pleasure, too.

His pain.

All of it.

He tore his mouth from Stavros', grabbing him by the chin, making sure to dig in and smirk when Stavros shivered. "I need something for the pain, diablo." Forgot however he was supposed to sound, his voice was a mangled, garbled growl. "I need something like you."

Stavros exhaled, a punch of hot breath across Daniel's face.

"I am offering it up." He didn't let go of Stavros. Couldn't. "I want you to take it all. And don't be gentle."

Stavros grabbed him by the crotch, and shoved his face into Daniel's until their noses were smashed together. "Don't tell me what the fuck to do." His teeth sank into Daniel's bottom lip.

No delicate bite.

"I'll touch you however I want. I'll definitely fuck you however I want."

Daniel threw his head back, bucking into the commanding grip on his shaft. In all ways he loved Stavros. Especially in their bed. Fast or slow. Hard or soft. Gentle.

Or this.

The scary cold look in his eyes. The intent to wreak havoc on his face.

Daniel loved it.

Tonight he wanted that havoc, in whatever form it took.

“Come.” Stavros pulled away suddenly, but held Daniel’s hand. “Come with me.”

“Yes.” Wherever. Whenever. He had no qualms about following his lover.

Lips curved into a smile, Stavros turned and led them back into the bedroom. The white sheets were rumpled, the light from one of the bedside lamps casting the right amount of glow.

Releasing Daniel’s hand, Stavros motioned to his sleep pants. “Take them off.”

He did. Two seconds flat.

Then he stood before his lover in just his skin.

Stavros touched his chest, his torso. “You’re always so hot,” he murmured, eyelids lowered. “I love your skin.”

When he cupped Daniel’s already aching shaft, he inhaled sharply. “Diablo—”

“Knees.” Stavros’ lashes lifted, alight with the hottest kind of hunger. “Now.”

Again. Two seconds flat. And he didn’t even mind that look in Stavros’ eyes that acknowledged Daniel’s eagerness to be here, carpet burning his knees, muscles aching as he looked up, licking his lips.

Waiting.

The silence blazed hot. Charged. Stavros looking down at him, the cold calculated look from before long gone, melted off by the heat and love and appreciation that crowded his eyes now. And Daniel…

Waiting.

Until he couldn’t. He leaned forward, wrapping both arms around Stavros’ lean hips as he pressed his face to his shorts-covered groin and inhaled.

Shuddering.

Because that intoxicating smell of lust and hunger would never not hit him upside the head. That smell, all for him, would never not thicken his throat and send need rippling down his pine.

That smell was his.

It belonged to him. As did Stavros. So Daniel yanked his shorts down his hips, taking his slick erection into his mouth before said shorts hit Stavros’ ankles.

“Fuck.” Stavros cupped his nape, holding Daniel to him, forcing him to take more. “Fuck.”

He’d wouldn’t be winning any prizes at a contest for this, but he liked it. The taste was everything Stavros, wild, crazy good. Daniel thirsted for more. So he drank, swallowing him down as best he could. One hand grasping him at the base as he took him in and out.

Up and down.

“Fuck, agápi mou.” Stavros moved into him, shallow thrusts as he rose on tiptoes. “Watch me. Watch me fuck that mouth.”

Daniel grunted, immersing himself in giving his lover pleasure. His blood pounded in his ears with every dip and drag of his tongue. Between his legs, he throbbed.

Wanting.

Needing.

Panting, breathing taking a backseat to sucking. Teeth grazing hard enough for Stavros to grab onto his hair and pull, yanking him off.

“Goddamn it.” He trembled against Daniel’s touch. “I’m gonna come for you. Come in your mouth and watch you choke on me.”

Yes.

“But not yet. Not now.” He held himself, brought his crown to Daniel’s lips. “Spit on it.”

Hesitation was nowhere in Daniel’s vocabulary where Stavros was concerned. He followed the command and watched as his saliva made a slow trek down the length of Stavros’ shaft before soaking his knuckles.

“Lick it up.”

He started at the base, tip of his stiffened tongue catching that saliva as he slid up. Up. Then took the flared head into his mouth again.

Sucking. Hollowed cheeks, pulling hard as Stavros swore and thrust harder.

Deeper.

“Shit. Fuck that mouth.” His language got even filthier during sex. “God.” He shoved Daniel’s face into his pubes. “Let me fuck that mouth. Yes.” He made a sound, an inhale with his mouth open, but his teeth clenched. A long, drawn out hiss.

Both hands flat against his ass, Daniel encouraged him to thrust. To do what he wanted. Stavros took that direction, hips surging forward to bury himself deep.

Breath locked off.

Eyes watered.

His entire body tensed.

But Daniel kept his wet eyes open, on Stavros. Eager for more. Taking whatever Stavros gave. Loving it. He was surrounded by him. In his throat. His mouth. His nostrils. Stavros was everywhere.

As he should be.

One thrust and he was gagging, throat rebelling. Choking. But Stavros held him still, fistful of hair in his grip. Eyes glittering as he stared down at Daniel. Plunging in and out.

Hard.

Fucking his mouth. Using him. Hands on Stavros' flexing ass, Daniel met him thrust for thrust. He dangled on the edge, Stavros' control of his body and his pleasure a potent turn on. He throbbed everywhere, the need to explode sitting heavy and hot at the base of his spine. Still, he pushed it aside. Too enamored with the cock in his mouth and the brutal fingers in his hair.

His knees protested the prolonged kneeling session, his balls too, but Daniel stayed right there, letting Stavros pound his mouth.

Until his lover pulled out. Saliva dripped down Daniel's chin as he watched Stavros sit at the edge of the bed and stroke himself.

"Crawl to it."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Stavros held his gaze, wrist working his cock.

Daniel's hand went to his own erection, squeezing the base. His entire body threatened to erupt with every command Stavros issued. Arousal had him weak, but not too weak to crawl the short distance to Stavros. Not too weak to settle between his spread knees and press his face to his groin.

Fingers sifted through his hair, pushing him down.

Down.

Stavros leaned back. His legs went up, heels pressing to the edge of the bed.

He offered up himself.

Daniel took.

Palms flat on the underside of Stavros' thighs. Tongue dragging over his saliva and pre-cum soaked balls. Lower.

Until Stavros was under his tongue, the most intimate part of him contracting with each swipe of Daniel's tongue. This too, he'd never get a medal for. But he put everything he had into it. Dipping in, swirling. Licking to the rhythm of Stavros' pants.

Lips on him, sucking until Stavros' fingers seemed determined to rip away the hair on his head.

Even here, he tasted of that familiar wildness. The pleasure-inducing danger. Even this, Daniel loved. Especially when Stavros pushed down on him, writhing on the bed, gasping, hand abandoning the stroking of his cock to grab the sheets and pull.

Every tremor Daniel felt. Every vibration. Every cry from Stavros' lips he loved.

"D-Daniel." Stavros twisted away from him. "Jesus fuck, I could sit on your tongue all day."

Daniel released him, licking his lips, back to squeezing his throbbing cock. *Dios.* He would come. Any second now, he'd explode.

"Mouth." Stavros sat up. "Give me your mouth."

Daniel squinted. "What—" A hand around his throat hauled him upright, and he found himself on top of Stavros on the bed.

Hands framing his face, eyes fierce, Stavros growled, "I want your tongue in my mouth."

Daniel blinked at him.

Stavros licked his chin. Then his tongue climbed higher. "You put your mouth on me, I put my mouth on you." He traced Daniel's bottom lip. "I don't give a fuck." And he slammed in.

Ravaging.

Teeth and tongue tearing at Daniel's mouth as though he were in search of something. Not that he minded. He never did.

"You eat my ass like that?" Stavros panted against him, cock pressing hard against Daniel's belly. "You eat my ass and make me forget my fucking name?" He closed his eyes, breath shuddering out onto Daniel. "Damn it, Daniel."

"Diablo."

"I want inside you. I need to come, and I'm doing it inside you." He touched Daniel's nose. "You understand me?"

He smiled. "I understand you."

"Good." Stavros rolled out from under him. "Spread it."

Daniel did. Right there on his back, thighs apart and knees to his chest. Stavros settled above him, chest heaving, jaw tight, eyes wild as he grabbed the lube and slicked himself up. Their eyes met and held as Stavros lowered himself.

Chest to Daniel's chest.

Lips meeting immediately. Daniel held him. One hand in Stavros' hair, the other gripping the sheets. He opened himself up. Offered it all.

And Stavros took, smooth cock head at his entrance, pushing in.

Breaching him.

They inhaled as one.

The pain was there, always the pain. But *Dios*, every inch of Stavros filled Daniel up. Slowly.

Torturously slow.

Through it all their tongues battled. Greedily lapping at each other, Daniel's long-neglected cock trapped between them, weeping sticky fluid.

Stavros pushed in.

Bottomed out. Daniel wrapped his right leg around Stavros' waist, ankle resting at the base of his spine. Urging him on.

His lover broke the kiss long enough to whisper, "I love you." The he reared back, slammed in, and they were off to the races.

Daniel clinging to his wet skin, arching off the bed with each thrust that seemed to reach deeper than ever. Stavros made love to him with steady strokes, taking control out the gate. Every slam lifted Daniel's hips off the bed. Every drive brought a snarl to his lips and Stavros kissed it all away. Destroying everything that wasn't them. Handling Daniel in a way he hadn't known before.

A way he liked.

So good.

He told him so, meeting every stroke. Opening wider to take him deeper.

Fire ate at him, racing down the length of his spine.

"Fuck." Stavros panted against his cheeks. "Body so good. So fucking good," he moaned. "Can't last."

"Then don't."

"Feel you take me," he grunted "I feel you take me, agápi mou. Ass fucking greedy for it. Sucking me in." He threw his head back, the veins bulging. "Goddamn."

Daniel clenched at his words, dragging a hand between them to stroke himself. He couldn't hold out, not now. Not with Stavros hitting that spot inside that turned his bones to liquid. "Please." He couldn't find any of his Spanish right then. "Please."

"Yes." Stavros yanked Daniel's left leg up, until his knee was almost touching his cheek. "Take it like that." He looked from Daniel's eyes to where they were joined. "Ride me. Ride me."

Daniel pushed back on him, rolling his hips, panting with each stroke. "Dios. Dios."

“God.” Stavros shuddered, eyes narrowed to slits. Arousal turned his face to the fiercest grimace. “Fucking you is— I can’t breathe when you squeeze me like that.” He released Daniel’s leg to touch his cheek. “Feels like I’m dying.”

Daniel kissed him again, swallowing his words. Stroking himself. It all rushed to his toes, that pleasure. Curled them. Then back up to his nuts.

One stroke.

One last thrust and he exploded with the loudest yell, coming. Coming.

From far away he heard Stavros’ voice. Soaked in their sex, his lover’s tone was cognac on ice. Intoxicating. Burning with the smoothest, deepest stroke. Stavros wasn’t done with him. Mouth on Daniel’s throat, he didn’t stop pistoning in and out.

Didn’t stop talking, either.

“Can’t stop,” he breathed. “Can’t stop watching you come. Can’t stop wanting to watch you come for me. I can fuck you all the time.”

Daniel clenched. Stavros’ breath hitched. His fingers on Daniel’s hip tightened, dug in. His thrusting faltered then picked up speed. Rapid fire.

“Ungh.” Daniel had nothing left. Spent. All used up.

But then teeth sank into his chest, above his heart. Heat flooded him as Stavros released, and somehow Daniel was pulling at the sheets again.

Head flown back again.

A full body clench that locked him down. From his jaw to his toes. His vison flashed white. And he knew nothing until Stavros collapsed onto his chest then rolled to his side.

Bodies slick.

Panting.

Daniel reached between them and took Stavros’ hand. Threading their fingers. He couldn’t tell which one of them trembled more. It didn’t matter. He brought their fingers to his lips.

“Diablo.” When Stavros turned his head to look at him, Daniel smiled. Even sweaty, face red from all that exertion, lips swollen, he was still the most captivating man Daniel had ever seen. “I love you.”

On his side, Stavros touched Daniel’s chest. His mouth opened, but the sound of glass shattering downstairs made both of them freeze.

Stavros was the one to launch himself upright and off the bed first, pulling on his shorts with one hand as he grabbed the guns atop the dresser.

Daniel followed him, hurriedly stepping into his pants and catching the weapon Stavros tossed at him.

Together they exited the bedroom and made their way downstairs, Stavros ahead. He didn't know what awaited them, so Daniel held his tongue, following Stavros' lead.

In the darkness, it still wasn't hard to see that the glass in the front door had been shattered. The answer as to how appeared in the form of a figure clad in all black who darted out from behind the couch and fired.

"Stav—"

Stavros went down with a grunt.

Heart in his throat, Daniel fired back, catching the shooter right between the eyes. He fell backward and Daniel didn't wait to see him hit the floor before he went to his knees beside Stavros.

"Stavros." He rolled Stavros onto his back, and his lover grimaced as he sat up.

"I'm okay." Stavros put a hand over his left thigh, blood already soaking his pants. "Bullet went through."

"What is this? What is happening?"

"Dunno, I—" Stavros' eyes went wide and his left arm lifted as fire exploded in Daniel's back.

He pitched forward. Stavros rolled, yelling, bullets firing, but somehow sound was muted for Daniel. What wasn't muted was the next explosion that hit just under his left armpit.

His body went numb.

Sound went away after that. Blood pooled under him as he lay sprawled on his stomach. Two shots. He watched Stavros shoot Daniel's shooter in the knees. Both of them. The man crashed to the floor next to his accomplice.

Two men.

They'd been ambushed.

Who?

Daniel couldn't blink. But he could float.

Dying. He felt it. Felt himself draining away.

Someone spoke to him, the words sounding as if they were being funneled through a wind machine.

"Stay with me."

Stay.

“Daniel.”

The wrenching sound of his name speared through the fog for a second, and he blinked up into Stavros’ grief-wet eyes.

“Don’t leave me.”

He didn’t want to, wasn’t looking forward to the censure in Petra’s eyes. But of course, with the life he’d led, his destination would be different from Petra’s. He had no control.

“Help is coming.” Stavros’ hands shook as he touched Daniel’s face. “Help is coming, you’ll be fine.”

First time Stavros lied to him. Daniel tried to call him on it, but all that came out when he opened his mouth was a hacking cough. And blood, spilling from lips he’d used to worship the man weeping for him now. “D-Diab—”

“Hush.” Hands on his face, Stavros pressed their foreheads together. “You’ll be fine, and you and I, we’re gonna find out who did this. And we’ll make them pay.”

“S-Sorry.” Daniel tried to touch him, but his hands were too heavy. Too cold. “Sorry.”

“No. No,” Stavros yelled. Agony and panic filled his eyes. “You don’t get to leave. You don’t get to leave.”

But he couldn’t stay.

“I won’t forgive you. Daniel, please.”

He didn’t want to go. He wanted endless forevers with the man kneeling in his blood. He wanted more lovemaking. More of Stavros swearing. He wanted life.

To live.

But death didn’t care.

Death had come knocking.

“Don’t make me do this without you.” Stavros’ broken pleas fell onto Daniel’s face in hot, wet drops.

Breaking his heart.

“Please. Please.”

He didn’t want to leave.

But the doors were already kicked open.

Death walked in.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Twice.

Daniel Nieto died twice. Both times in Stavros' arms.

Dried blood on his hands, under his fingernails. He stared at them, numb. He didn't even feel the wound in his thigh that the doctors had bandaged up.

He paced the hallway, every heavy step echoing. He definitely shouldn't be up and walking with a bullet wound in him. But he dared anyone to keep him still. Teeth gritted, he tried to think. Forced himself to think. Focus. Except he was cloudy. All his training. All his experience, gone with the bang of a bullet.

He died.

He fucking died after Stavros commanded him not to. He left.

Stavros felt as if he wasn't all there. Pieces of him, the pieces of him that mattered, were all in that fucking operating room. All on that table. He trusted no one with Daniel's life. No one. And the fact that he had to sit out here in this quiet fucking hallway with its blue walls and stale fucking coffee helped nothing.

One second they were happy, and the next…

He stopped pacing. Dropped to one knee and buried his face in his hands.

There was nothing, nothing like watching the person you love take their last breath. Nothing like that grief. Paralyzing. Terrifying. Nothing as bleak as the moment when you realize you would eagerly follow.

He used his hands and his own breath to bring Daniel back the first time. The one and only time he'd used his hands for that purpose. His lover stayed alive but unconscious for ten minutes after that. Enough time for the paramedics to arrive.

Then he coded in the ambulance.

Five minutes they worked on him, with Stavros right there threatening every fucking body. That man was going to live. His heart was going to beat. He was going to breathe. They'd come too far, been through too much. And Stavros was too goddamn selfish to allow Daniel Nieto to steal his heart then leave him lonely.

His tears had dried long before the paramedics arrived at the beach house.

Fuck tears, give him anger instead.

He embraced the anger. At himself. The shooters. At fucking Daniel.

Fists balled, he straightened, leaning against the wall to keep his balance. However long it took, he'd be pacing this hallway. He wasn't leaving. Not until he knew Daniel was okay.

Daniel used a fake ID to get around, so Stavros gave that as his information. He also told them Daniel was his husband. How else was he supposed to get any updates? How else would he know the man he loved was alive?

"Here."

Someone nudged his shoulder and he spun, glaring at Toro and the cup of coffee the younger man held out. He hadn't even heard anyone approaching. "Don't fucking sneak up on me." He took the coffee and gulped it, not even flinching as it scalded his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

Toro didn't blink at his barked words. He simply made his way to the set of uncomfortable and questionably dirty chairs over in the corner and sat.

He'd been the first phone call Stavros made, after 911. In turn, Toro called Syren. Stavros carried Daniel outside to meet the paramedics. He didn't want anyone coming inside to try and save the man he'd gagged and handcuffed in the kitchen.

After they left, Toro and Syren handled the disposal of the man Daniel had killed. And they took away the live one. Stavros didn't know yet where they took him, but he'd given clear instructions.

Keep him alive and *he's mine*.

Not right now. Not when worry for Daniel had his whole body shaking. Not when he couldn't stand still for two seconds. But soon he'd have a meeting with the man who broke into his home and shot his lover.

Soon.

When he could meet Toro's eyes without feeling guilty.

They were supposed to be safe.

Happy.

What if they weren't?

What if they didn't get to have forever?

He made his legs work, made them move. And he slumped next to Toro, head tilted back against the wall. Eyes closed. The coffee burned his palm, and he just wanted to throw it against wall. Dirty up the immaculately clean hallway.

The blood on his hands mocked him. Dry and itchy. Daniel's blood was caked on his pants leg, on his shirt sleeves.

So much red.

So much fucking red.

He refused to wash his hands. Refused to change his clothes. Two hours. He couldn't.

Not yet.

"Family of Daniel Hernandez?"

The red-headed nurse's white clogs squeaked on the floor, and still Stavros hadn't heard her approach.

At her question, he jumped to his feet, along with Toro.

"I'm his nephew," Toro told her.

"And I'm his husband." To his credit, Toro didn't even blink.

The nurse smiled at them with kind brown eyes. "Your husband is out of surgery," she told Stavros.

He inhaled. "How is he?"

"They removed the bullets, and he's lost a lot blood." She glance down at the papers in her hand. "He's still unconscious, and the doctors will be monitoring."

"But is he okay?" Stavros pressed.

Her eyes filled with pity then. "It's too soon to say, sir. I hope your husband is a fighter." She patted his arm and walked off.

Fuck yeah, he was a fighter.

“Wait,” he called after her. When she looked over her shoulder, he asked, “Can I see him?”

“I’ll check.”

Toro touched his shoulder again. “He’ll be fine. Tío is a fighter.”

Tío. He was uncle and brother.

Lover.

The sadness in Toro’s eyes pulled at Stavros, making him realize he wasn’t the only one hurting. Wasn’t the only one scared.

“He’s a fighter,” he repeated as he hugged Toro. “He’s the dirtiest fucking fighter, too. He’ll be fine.”

Twenty minutes later, the nurse led him into Daniel’s room then quietly snuck off. Stavros stood next to the bed, hands fisted.

He was pale. So pale. Traces of blood still on his chin. Tubes were in his mouth. His arms. But he looked like he was asleep. He didn’t look like a man who’d died.

Twice.

He didn’t look like a man hanging on to life by a thread.

But the sight of him so still yanked away Stavros’ equilibrium, and he fell to his knees. “You wake up.” The words were wet, tripping over each other as they poured out his mouth. “Wake up, and come back to me.”

He grasped the bed rail, holding himself up when grief would’ve laid him flat.

“She can’t have you. I need you—” His voice broke. “I need you more.” Head bowed, he slid his fingers over Daniel’s. “I need you more.”

He wanted to switch places. Daniel would be alive and free and vibrant. Stavros was to blame. The beach house was his. The list of enemies he’d made over the years…

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He bent lower, putting his lips to the back of Daniel’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

Whichever one of his enemies had come after him would regret it. He’d make sure of it. “I’m waiting for you,” he whispered. “However long you want to take, I’m waiting for you to open your eyes and look at me the way you do.”

With wonder and surprise.

Love and lust.

Hunger and appreciation.

He brushed a kiss to Daniel’s forehead and forced himself to walk away. Out that room. Leaving felt like an abandonment. He ripped his heart out and left it in that room. On that bed.

Then he went to find Toro. He found Levi and Donovan Cintron, as well.

Levi ran to him. “How is he?”

Stavros couldn’t. Two men staring back at him with Daniel’s eyes were two too many. “Toro, where’s Syren?”

Toro glanced at Levi then back to Stavros. “Outside.”

“My people will be here in under twenty minutes. No one goes into that room unless we know every goddamn thing about them.”

“Stavros.”

“They’ll protect him.” His voice caught and he looked away, ignoring Levi’s gaze. They’ll do what Stavros failed to do. “They’ll watch out for him with their lives.”

“And where will you be?” Levi asked.

Not there. He couldn’t be there.

He walked out the hospital, and into the black SUV idling just outside the entrance. Ignoring the three other men in the vehicle, he turned to Syren.

“Take me to him.”

Petra Nieto had been his last personal kill. Now, Stavros looked forward to getting his hands dirty. He looked forward to letting someone else’s blood stain his fingers.

Syren had the shooter in a warehouse less than half an hour outside of Atlanta. Both knees bandaged, face swollen, arms zip tied behind his back, he lifted his head when Stavros strode into the place. His swollen eyes still managed to widen when he spotted Stavros.

He came by himself. Without the backing of the men who worked for him. Without Syren, too. This wasn’t anyone’s fight but his and Daniel’s. Since Daniel was out of commission, it fell on Stavros to fix this. He rolled up his sleeves as he gazed down at the still figure peering up at him under swollen eyelids.

Kerry was his name. The dead one went by Curtis. Kerry sported a faux hawk and a three inch scar near the corner of his left eye. It made Stavros think about his own scar, the one Daniel had put on his face. It was barely noticeable now.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked quietly.

“Should I?” A frown creased Kerry’s forehead.

So Stavros hadn’t been the target. “Who hired you?” He wanted this to be done and over with so he could get back to Daniel. But when Kerry sucked his teeth and tried for a cocky attitude, Stavros figured that shit was too much to ask.

“Fuck I look like?” Kerry spat. “A snitch?”

Stavros smiled at him. “I think you look like a man who hasn’t yet realized he’s dead and buried.”

“And you keep talking shit when your mans is dead and you’re all shot up.”

“Not my first bullet, Kerry.” Stavros stepped on Kerry’s right knee, grinning when he screamed. “Won’t be my last.”

“Argh. Fuck.” Kerry panted. “Fuck.”

“I want a name.” Stavros didn’t remove his foot from that knee. In fact, he put more weight on it as Kerry writhed, his bloated face a twisted mask of agony. “Someone paid you to do a job, and I need to have a sit down with your employer.”

“Man, fuck you.”

“Okay.” Stavros stepped back. He didn’t have the time for this. Didn’t have the fucking heart to prolong this. He pulled his gun and shot Kerry again.

Two bullets.

One in each knee.

A-fucking-gain.

And he dropped to his haunches and watched silently as Kerry gagged and screamed, and cursed him, his blood stinking up the place. Making Stavros think about Daniel’s blood.

“I’m a busy man,” he said above Kerry’s shrill screams. “This isn’t where either of us wants to be. Why don’t we change that? Tell me who hired you.”

“They’ll kill my family, man!” Tears and snot mixed with the dried blood on Kerry’s face and fell in crimson drops down his chin.

“That sounds like a *you* problem.”

“Kill me,” Kerry screamed. “Fucking kill me.”

Stavros rolled his eyes. “I am going to kill you,” he said gently. “But first, I want a name. Otherwise, I keep you alive like this, and I keep putting bullets in your fucking knees.” He held up his Glock. “I’ve got a full magazine, and plenty backup.”

Kerry panted. “I need a doctor, man. Get me a—” His breath cut off. “Get me a doctor.”

“I know what you need. You know what I need.” Stavros grasped his chin, fingers sliding in all the blood, saliva and snot. “Drop a name.”

“I don’t-I don’t have it. I don’t—” Kerry shook his head wildly, eyes almost swollen shut. “Curtis dealt with that shit. I was there to watch his back.”

Stavros cocked his head. “That is just…too bad.”

“I swear, man.” Kerry pleaded with his entire body, leaning forward. “I swear. I don’t know anything.”

Footsteps sounded behind Stavros and Kerry’s eyes brightened a fraction.

“Help. Help me. This motherfucker ’bout to—”

“Got what you need,” Syren told Stavros. “You’re gonna want to wrap this up. Now.” He disappeared, and Stavros turned back to Kerry.

“Today is your lucky day, Kerry.”

“You-You letting me go?”

Look at all that hope. “No. But you do get to die quickly.” He squeezed the trigger. Kerry’s head slammed into the wall, a small hole in the middle of his forehead. “That’s luck right there.”

He walked out the room and found Syren standing just outside the door, a bunch of papers in his hand. The three men who’d accompanied them on the ride over were nowhere to be seen, but Stavros didn’t delude himself into thinking Syren was alone.

“They got paid in cash,” Syren said. “And Kerry was right, Curtis was point.”

“You have a name?”

Syren handed over the papers silently, and Stavros quickly skimmed them.

Son of a bitch.

Son of a bitch.

Betrayal.

The papers fell from his grasp as he strode toward the exit.

“He wouldn’t want you—”

He spun, gun aimed squarely at Syren’s head. “Don’t tell me what the fuck he would want. You’re not the one wearing his blood like a second skin. He didn’t die in your arms.”

“No.” Syren shook his head. “But I know what you’re going through. And you can’t just go wreck shit in his name.”

Stavros grinned at him slowly. “Watch me. Keep your fucking eyes on me.”

Syren wasn’t the only one with contacts and endless resources.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Antonio Nieto didn't look like a man sentenced to a couple decades in prison. In fact, as Stavros stood just outside the room inside the non-descript, yet highly secured building downtown LA, he had to admit the man looked very relaxed.

Clad in regular clothes as opposed to a prison-issued jumpsuit, Antonio sat in the chair, head tipped back and to the side, as he stared out the window to his right. His dark hair hung longer in front than the back, and rosary beads hung around his neck, nestled against the soft blue of his shirt.

He didn't look like he posed a threat.

Took Stavros three days to get here, and during that time he wavered between what he'd do. What he could do. His first instinct would always be to hit back. But this one was different.

He wasn't the one who'd been betrayed. Wasn't his call to make, as much as he wished otherwise. Goddamn, he wished otherwise.

"Antonio Nieto." He strode into the room like a man on a mission. Because he was. And he took so much pleasure in the blatant shock that widened Antonio's eyes and dropped his jaw. "I see you know who I am."

"What the hell are you doing here, Konstantinou?" Antonio peered past him to the corridor. His face was still bruised up from his recent beating.

"Passing through. I gather you didn't expect to see me?" Stavros sat opposite him and crossed his legs, ankle resting across his knee.

"My brother should have killed you after what you did to him."

"Yes." Stavros nodded. "He should have."

Antonio's eyes widened. "What do you want? I'm a busy man."

“I can see that.” Stavros sat back, a finger absently stroking his chin as he said, “A man I love died in my arms recently. A man I love is lying unconscious in a hospital bed today, and I have questions.”

The son of a bitch chuckled. “You think I care about you or your faggot ways?” He leaned toward the door. “Guard. Guard, get me out of here.”

“No. You get to stay. You haven’t asked me the identity of the man I love.” He stood and walked around, standing behind Antonio’s chair. And Stavros unbuckled his belt.

“Guard! Guard!”

“The cameras are off. The guards are gone.” He looped the belt around Antonio’s neck, wrapped both ends in his fist and pulled. “Ask me the name of the man I love.”

Antonio fought him, even with his hands cuffed in front of him, he fought. Bucking. Kicking at the table and arching. But Stavros held that son of a bitch, belt to his throat as he pulled, tightening it.

Choking him while he gasped for air. Until his face turned purple and his movements ceased. Then he eased up.

Antonio lurched forward, coughing.

“Ask me,” Stavros snarled. He grabbed him by the hair, yanked him backward. “Ask me his name.”

“Wha-what—”

“Daniel Nieto.” Stavros whispered it against Antonio’s forehead. “The name of the man I love. Daniel Nieto.” He pushed a stiff Antonio away and put back on his belt before retaking his seat.

“You’re a liar.” Antonio brought his bound hands up to clutch his throat, still panting.

“You put a hit out on him.” Fuck, he needed a cigarette in the worst way. Why had he quit that shit? “I want to know why.”

“My brother would never betray his wife like that. My brother is not a puto.”

“Tell me why.” Stavros slammed his fists down on the table. “Funny he’s your brother when you find out he’s fucking me. Was he your brother when you aligned yourself with The Perez Boys and sent them after him? Was he your brother when you had yourself beaten up to play on his sympathies?”

Antonio clammed up, the too-familiar Nieto stubbornness darkening his eyes and stiffening his chin.

“I know you’re with The Perez Boys now. I know that bounty on his head wasn’t Felipe Guzmán, but from Perez, authorized by you.” Palms flat on the table, Stavros told him, “I know you sent men after him just days after he buried your mother. I want to know why.”

“Fuck you,” Antonio spat. “You know nothing.”

“I know him.” He smiled. “I know the way he sleeps, with one eye open. I know how much he loves chorizo and eggs with coffee sweet enough to put you in a coma in the mornings. I know when he’s tired or sad just by his touch. I know he can’t sing for shit, but I watched him sing to your mother as she died in his arms. He’s fucking mine.” He pounded his chest. “You think I’ll let you get away with this shit? With betraying him when he’s done nothing but love his family to his own detriment?”

“What will you do?” Antonio taunted. “Kill me? You can use that belt all you want, but we both know you can’t fucking touch me.”

Leaping over the table, Stavros grabbed him by the throat. Fingers curved to claws, digging into him. Squeezing tighter than fucking tight. “I can touch you.”

Antonio’s eyes bulged.

“I can touch you, and I can make you feel it,” he whispered. “You feel like testing me? I’m not going to kill you, not now.” He dropped his hand and slid back into his seat. “You’re going to suffer first. Because I can get at you anytime. And I’ve got people everywhere. Anytime. You never know who you’ll bump into in the cafeteria. You never know who’ll be watching in that shower.”

Rage flashed in Antonio’s eyes.

“You’ll spend the rest of your time watching your back. Unless your brother wants your head sooner than that. Then I’ll give it to him.” He got to his feet and straightened his clothes. “One thing is for sure, you’re not getting out of prison alive.”

He walked away.

The pain in his throat registered first.

Daniel’s eyes fluttered open, instantly watering at the bright light that burned. He ignored it, looking around the hospital room. The door gave it

away. As did the machines beeping in his ear. His gaze landed on the body lying on the pull-out sofa in the far corner under the window.

Stavros?

Memories flooded back, and his heart kicked into a wild gallop. Stavros. He tried to call out but his throat wasn't having it. He could only moan instead.

The body rustled. Dark head lifted and Toro stared at him.

Where was Stavros?

"Tío." Toro raced to him, calling out, "Nurse. Nurse." He dropped to his knees beside the bed, grabbing on to Daniel's hand. "Tío, you're awake."

The relief in his nephew's eyes humbled Daniel, but he wanted to know, "St-Stav—"

"Mr. Hernandez." An older gentlemen with a white lab coat and stethoscope walked into the room, a nurse at his side. "Welcome back, sir."

Daniel ignored them, keeping his attention on Toro. "Stav?"

"Hon, can you step outside a minute?" The nurse addressed Toro. "The doctor needs to look him over."

Toro held his gaze for a second longer then left. That meant nothing. Stavros was fine. He'd been fine. Nothing was wrong with him. So why was he so afraid? What happened in that beach house?

He allowed the doctor's poking and prodding, zoning in and out as he and the nurse talked between themselves. Pausing to nod every once in a while when either of them turned their attentions to him. He learned he'd been shot twice and undergone a two-hour surgery. One of the bullets came mere centimeters from piercing his lung, and the other one had shattered inside him.

He'd coded twice.

He'd been moved from the hospital to a private facility, and had a round-the-clock security detail, on Stavros' orders.

"Your husband must love you very much." The nurse patted his good shoulder, and Daniel blinked.

Husband.

He was fine. Stavros was fine. He unfurled the fingers digging into his palm. Allowing himself to breathe. Deep breaths that stung, but that was all right. He was alive. Stavros was alive. And they'd find whoever came for them.

Make them pay.

He swallowed the medication the nurse gave him with tepid water and tilted his head back against the pillows, slowly closing his eyes.

He wanted Stavros. His Greek made everything better.

“He’s awake, sir.”

Footsteps shuffled, and Daniel opened his eyes.

Stavros stood in the doorway, staring at him as the nurse and doctor made their exit. The door closed behind them, and Stavros didn’t move.

Daniel sat up. Or he tried to. His back wasn’t having it, not yet. “Diablo.”

His lover’s face was expressionless. Hands in his pockets. Eyes giving nothing away. Fear reared its head again.

“Diablo.”

“You don’t get to leave.” The words shook, pain and anger most potent as they tumbled past Stavros’ lips. He stalked Daniel in the narrow bed. “You don’t get to fucking make me love you then leave me behind.”

“Stav.” He caught the bags under Stavros’ eyes. The strain around his mouth. His unkempt hair. “Perdón.”

“Fuck.” Stavros fell on him. Carefully, though. Cupping Daniel’s face with cold, trembling hands. “You died. You died. You died!” He spun away then faced Daniel just as quickly. “Twice I watched you stop breathing.” His breaths were labored, agony bleeding from his eyes. Dripping from his words. “Twice I watched your heart stop.”

“Stavros.” Daniel reached out a hand for him.

Stavros caught it. Clinging tight.

That grasp hurt more than the pain in his back, but Daniel welcomed it. He tugged Stavros closer, brought their joint hands to his mouth. “I am sorry.”

Stavros inhaled. “God.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He came apart then. It started in his eyes and worked its way down until a choking sound fell from his lips. Bending over, he gasped for breath. “Se agápo.” He shook against Daniel. “I love you.”

“Diablo, te amo,” Daniel whispered against his temple. “I’m never leaving you again.” He couldn’t wrap his arms around Stavros like he wanted. “I’m okay, and once I get out of here we will handle whoever violated our home.”

Stavros stiffened slightly.

Daniel frowned. “What is it?” Stavros pulled back, but Daniel held on to him when he would’ve stepped away. Stavros didn’t meet his eyes. “What is it?”

“Focus on getting better.” Stavros licked his lips, gaze on something somewhere above Daniel’s head. “That comes first.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “Tell me what you’re hiding.”

“Agápi mou.”

“You know who did this to us.” That was not a question. He could read Stavros. “Why don’t you want me to know?”

His lover’s mouth opened and closed a few times before he pursed his lips then nodded. “I know.”

“Tell me.”

But Stavros simply cupped his jaw and brushed their lips together. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” What was Stavros so afraid to say?

“Antonio.”

Daniel blinked. What? “Antonio?’ He shook his head. “Eso es imposible.” *That’s impossible.* “Antonio is my brother, diablo. What you’re suggesting—”

“I’m not suggesting anything.” Stavros’ tone was hard, cold. “What I am telling you is that your brother has aligned himself with The Perez Boys.” He released Daniel and got to his feet. “What I am telling you is that your brother had them put the bounty on your head. We simply assumed it was Felipe because he hated you.”

“No.”

“What I am telling you is that your brother paid two hundred and fifty thousand in cash to The Perez Boys who then contracted out your death to the men who broke into the beach house.”

“No.”

“Listen to me.” Stavros gritted his teeth, jaw ticking as he tucked a finger under Daniel’s chin. “I’m sorry.” His voice dropped to just above a whisper. “It’s true.”

“I need—” He needed to get up. He tried to, but the pain shortened his breath and made him woozy. He put his head back. “I need to see him.”

“I saw him.”

Daniel froze. “Is he alive?”

Stavros smile was slow in coming, but quick to disappear. “That’s the two hundred and fifty thousand dollar question, agápi mou. The answer depends on you. What do you want?”

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EPILOGUE

Three weeks and Daniel still hadn't answered Stavros' question. He'd been released from the hospital, and they moved right back into the beach house three hours away from Atlanta.

What did he want?

He wanted the proof Stavros had laid out in front of him to be lies. He wanted to take the fear away from Stavros' eyes, because that fear remained. When he got up from their bed in the middle of the night, Stavros was there. When he left the house, Stavros insisted on accompanying him.

That couldn't be them.

He was healing, though not as quickly as he wanted. Lifting his arms above his head was a chore nowadays. Coughing and sneezing brought his full attention to the wounds every time.

But he was alive.

He had Stavros and Levi and Toro.

He'd sold both the Brooklyn brownstone and the house in Norcross, and handed over the house where he'd kept his mother to Charlie and Lành. They deserved it, and they needed to be safe. He'd make sure they were safe. The house he'd built for Petra, Daniel had it torn down.

The beach house was home. Their base. Stavros was away in New York, helping his uncle with the business, but Daniel expected him back any day. In the meantime, Toro was with him.

Stavros left nearly half the men on his payroll as security. Despite Daniel's strong objections. He didn't need to be babysat, but he'd seen the

fear in Stavros' eyes. The look that said if Daniel didn't agree to the security, Stavros wouldn't leave.

So he'd capitulated.

That needed to stop.

It couldn't be them.

"Tío." Toro stepped onto the balcony and stood next to him, staring out onto the beach. "Your man just called. He's on his way."

His man.

He patted Toro on the back. "Gracias."

"He loves you, Tío. I watched him in the hospital. He was scared shitless, but he was also barking orders." Toro chuckled. "Ordering people around. Threatening them. He wanted to fall apart." Toro's grip tightened on the railing. "Hell, I was falling apart, but he never did."

"He's strong." Stronger than Daniel had ever credited him.

"Does it still feel strange to you?" Toro faced him, brow lifted, Nieto eyes genuinely curious. "Being with him. Loving him after all of it. Does it still feel strange?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes and no." When Toro's brow lifted, he explained, "He's familiar in a strange way." He shrugged. "I don't know how better to explain it."

Toro nodded as if he understood and they watched the sun set in the distance in comfortable silence.

His nephew cleared his throat after a while. "I'm sorry about Antonio."

Daniel frowned. "Why? It is nothing to do with you."

"Maybe not, but he is still my father and he hurt you." Toro looked away, staring down at a couple walking their dogs on the beach below. "You won't get an apology from him. So I'm giving you mine."

"Toro." Daniel gave him a one-armed hug. "Antonio wanted me to do what I did all our lives. He wanted me to fix things for him. Save him. That is his crime. Never yours." All of it because Daniel couldn't get him out of jail. All of it because Daniel didn't want to retake the business.

"I know."

Daniel really hoped he did. "I want your permission," he said quietly. "I want to tell Stavros about you."

Toro jerked his head around to stare at him. "You didn't tell him?"

"Of course not. Not without your permission." He paused. "Do you think he will see you different? You can trust—"

“I trust him.” Toro held a hand. “Most importantly, I trust you. You are more a father to me than Antonio ever was.” He inclined his chin. “You can tell him.”

Daniel smiled. “I loved you when you were my niece, Miranda. And I love you now, as my nephew. My affection for you will never change.”

Toro hugged him briefly then dropped his hands and stepped back. “I’m going to call mamá, tell her I’ll be home tomorrow.”

“That should make her stop cursing my name.”

Toro chuckled. “Nothing will make her stop cursing your name.”

That was true.

Toro left and Daniel remained on the balcony, taking a seat and putting his feet up on the rail. He sipped from the glass of sweet tea at his elbow. No alcohol for him because of his meds, but he needed a taste of something smooth that burned high and slow.

“What are you doing?”

His lips curved and he threw his head back, eyes closed. “Wishing for a taste of you.”

“That so?” Lips brushed his forehead. His nose. Then pressed to his mouth. “Like this?”

“No.” He caught Stavros’ face in both hands and kissed him deeper. Eyes open. Tongue parting his lips, sliding in and deep and yes…Stavros moaned. “Like that.”

Gray eyes smiled at him. Happy and relieved and content. Daniel stroked his lover’s face, thumb brushing his jaw softly.

“Welcome home, diablo. Our bed’s been empty.” He licked Stavros’ chin. Sucked on his bottom lip. “And I’ve been lonely.”

Those eyes glittered. Nostrils flared, Stavros told him huskily, “I’m home.”

“Sí.” Now Daniel could breathe easier. Now he could actually sleep at night.

Stavros released him long enough to take a seat next to him then grabbed his hand and linked their fingers. He wore a suit, like always, but the jacket had been discarded. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up, exposing his muscular arms. Daniel never even noticed another man’s forearms, until Stavros. Like everything else about his lover, that, too, was captivating.

He put his head on Stavros' shoulder. Inhaling him. Spice and musk and just Stavros. "I have an answer to the two hundred and fifty thousand dollar question."

"You do?"

"I've lost too much already, diablo. I can't do it again."

"Then you won't." He said it with conviction. With promise. With knowing.

"I want him alive."

He felt Stavros' nod. "Then he stays alive."

"You saw him?"

"Naí, agápi mou." Stavros stroked his thumb over the back of Daniel's hand, fingers caressing the rosary that remained wrapped around his wrist. "I did."

"How did he look?"

"Like a man in charge. Like someone who thought he had power."

"Take it away, but keep him untouched." Stavros could do that. Daniel trusted his lover to do that. This wasn't something he could handle, and he had someone more than equipped to deal with Antonio at his side.

His blood tried to have him killed. Conditioning made Daniel want to retaliate, but despite everything, Antonio was family. His brother might not think it, but family was life. And Daniel couldn't hurt him. He couldn't spill Antonio's blood.

He refused to kill his mother's son.

"Done." Stavros paused then shifted so he could peer down at Daniel. "You want to see him?"

Did he? "Maybe one day. Some day." He wanted to be who he'd never been before. A man not always looking over his shoulder. Someone not always consumed with revenge and hatred. Because he hated Antonio, but he loved him, too. "I want to have us for a while longer, diablo. Just us. I want you to myself."

Stavros' gaze went hot. He touched Daniel's throat, stroked his scarred flesh. "We could be in a room filled with people, you'd still have me to yourself." Lips pressed to Daniel's, he whispered, "I live to die for you. I am here to die for you."

"No." Daniel shook his head. "No more dying. We live. Tú eres mi familia." *You are my family.* "Family is you."

Stavros kissed him. Soft bites. Stavros' version of tender. "Family is you."

The End

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COMING SOON

Kiss Your Scars (The final book in the Loose Ends series)

Renzo Vega knew he wasn't alone the instant he stepped into his darkened office. No sound, except for the definite click of the door shutting behind him. Still, a disturbance clung to air.

Thick.

He froze, hair on his nape at attention, calling the warning. This was a first. He dropped his hand slowly, reaching for the gun at his waist. No one had developed balls big enough to come at him at his club.

First for everything though, right?

"I'm hoping we can do without the gun play."

Before he could put a name to the familiar voice, the lamp atop his desk blinked on. The only reason his knees didn't hit the floor was because of training.

Reflex.

That was the only thing keeping him upright as he met serious purple eyes. The man seated at his desk leaned back, a small smile curving his mouth.

"Hello…Renzo, is it now?" His eyebrows lifted, fingers drumming on his knee as he waited.

Didn’t matter the amount of time that passed. That gaze still packed the most gut-wrenching punch. He swallowed once. Then twice, because for some reason his mouth was the driest it had ever been. “Syren, right?” He refused to budge from in front the door. “That’s the name you go by nowadays?”

They’d gone by different names, way back when. They also weren’t the same men they’d been back then either. But somehow, Syren still had the same effect. And he looked at Renzo the way he did the last they’d been this close.

With sadness and guilt.

“How did you get in?” He kept security at all entrance and exits to his club. And it didn’t matter that the club was closed tonight. Somebody was for sure getting fired.

“Your guard at the door stepped away.” Syren smiled. “Figured it was an open invitation.”

Yeah, he would figure that. Nothing stopped Syren when he wanted something. “What do you want?” He regretted asking that question. It put him at a disadvantage, and with Syren Rua that was a weakness Renzo couldn’t afford.

Not again.

“What makes you think I want something?” Syren asked.

Renzo scoffed. “Of course you want something, otherwise, why would you step out from the shadows to meet face to face?” He leaned back against the door and crossed his ankles, trying for casual so Syren wouldn’t see how much his presence rattled. “I thought you preferred watching me from the shadows?”

“Does that mean you’re not happy to see me?” Syren rose, challenging Renzo with his gaze as he trailed a finger over the edge of the desk. “Because I’m happy to see you.”

“I was happy when you stayed far away,” Renzo told him. “I don’t need you looking out for me.”

“What do you need?”

“Don’t fucking do that,” Renzo snarled. “We’re not *them* anymore.”

“What are we then?”

Renzo didn’t know the answer to that, but he knew for damn sure they wouldn’t find the answers staring at each other from across his office. He couldn’t describe what it felt like, being so close to Syren after all this time.

The things they'd been through.

Sadness and guilt seemed the correct words for it. But then he remembered the constant interference in his life.

"Admit it," Syren said. "You hate me a little, don't you, Renzo?"

Hate. Strong word to describe strong emotion. "I don't hate you. I want you to stop fucking orchestrating my life."

"Is that what you call it?"

"What the hell is it then?" Renzo pushed away from the door, took two strides toward him then stopped himself. Because he couldn't. Damn it, he couldn't. "Does your husband know I'm the reason you're always in Atlanta?"

Syren didn't blink. He didn't answer either.

"Am I your dirty secret, Syren?" Renzo went to him then, letting all that emotion, untapped for so long, color his words. "Does your man know the lengths you'll go to in order to keep me in your life? Maybe I should enlighten him."

"This is about me making Dutch give you this job, isn't it?" It was as if he hadn't heard anything Renzo said at all. All of five feet nothing, with purple eyes and white-blond hair, Syren was the most beautiful person Renzo ever laid eyes on.

Most stubborn, too.

When they'd known each other, back when they'd meant something to each other, he'd been the deadliest. That part hadn't changed. Syren remained a master strategist.

Renzo used to love that.

"You didn't need to come here," he said hoarsely. "I don't want you here. I don't want you in my life."

"That's too bad." Syren touched him, his jaw.

Renzo shuddered.

"I am in your life. I will remain in your life. The choice is no longer yours." Syren's hand went away. "When you're ready to claim what's always been yours…"

Renzo opened his eyes just in time to catch Syren's smile.

"I'll be here."

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STANDALONES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Grenadian transplant, Avril now lives in Tucker, GA, with a madly tolerant husband. Together they raise an eccentric daughter who's pretty *meh* about reading and school. Avril's earliest memories of reading revolve around discussing the plot points of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys with an equally book-minded mother.

Always in love with the written word, Avril finally decided to do the writing in August of '09 and never looked back. She's been nominated for numerous awards, including Best Author, Best series, and Favorite All-Time Author. In 2013 Avril won Evernight Publishing's Reader's Choice Award for the LGBT (Male/Male) category.

Addicted to cupcakes, the ID Channel and the UFC, Avril writes Gay and Erotic Romance with happy endings; she remains a believer of love in all its forms.

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